“Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?”

Race in the Lives of White Muslim Converts in Australia

Submitted by Oishee Alam

2010
I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

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Signed: ________________________________

Dated: ________________________________
I wish to acknowledge and pay respects to the Muru-ora-dial and Cadigal peoples of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which I live and study on respectively, and on which this thesis was typed. No study on race and racialisation in Australia is complete without a discussion about relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and I regret that the limited scope of my thesis precluded me from addressing those relations in any depth.

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Introduction

It is rare for a person to be racially identified as ‘white’ in the popular media of this country. Whiteness is unalteringly held up as the unspoken norm, an assumed state of omnipresence, “a base colour that regulates all others” (Bhabha 1998: 23), whose only mention lies in its absence. References to converts to Islam are one of the few occasions where whiteness is not viewed as natural and assumed, but is instead identified as an integral and unnerving facet of the story. 'White British Converts to Islam Pose Suicide-Bombing Threat in UK’ (Terrorism Focus 2008), 'White Muslim Convert Arrested Over 'Gordon Brown Assassination Plot' (Telegraph UK 2008), 'Al-Qaeda’s White Army of Terror' (Scotland on Sunday 2008): as far as the mass media are concerned, the Muslim converts in these stories no longer enjoy the privilege of racial invisibility; they have effectively relinquished it by taking on a racialised religious identity that is often constructed as incompatible with whiteness and Western values (Dunn et. al. 2007), and themselves become racialised as a result. While they remain white enough to be marked as such in newspapers and on television, they are not quite so white that they will escape the marker entirely as they may have done prior to conversion, they are not white enough to not be racially identified at all.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that white converts to Islam occupy a nebulous space in a contemporary Australia in which close to 90% of the population nominate their ancestry as Australian, English, Irish, Scottish, German, or any combination of the five (ABS 2006a), yet
only 1.71% of Australians nominate themselves as Muslim (ABS 2006b). New converts and 'born again' Muslims with a renewed fervour for the religion are singled out by Western governments' counter-terrorism initiatives as groups that are more susceptible to the allure of radical Islam (National Action Plan 2006). Since the London bombings in 2005, public discourse about home grown terrorism has increased in Australia as government officials and senior staff in security organisations continue to express concern about the threat that “comes from the Australian born, Australian educated, and Australian residents” (Kevin Rudd, Attorney General's Office 2010).

Part of the fear of radicalisation likely stems from a stage of fanaticism that some Muslim converts claim to experience, early on in their Muslim lives, often affectionately referred to as *convertitis* within the Muslim community (Roald 2004: 282). Roald (2004: 283) suggests that such a phase is a universal one amongst converts, quoting the coiner of the term, Tim Winters (also known as Shaykh Abdul Hakim Murad), as saying:

> The initial and quite understandable response of many newcomers is to become an absolutist. Everything going on among pious Muslims is angelic, everything outside the circle of faith is demonic, the appeal of this outlook lies in its simplicity. The newly arranged landscape on which the convert looks is seen in satisfying black and white terms of Them versus Us, good against evil.

The threat that white converts' quest for absolutism poses is often considered more confronting than that of Muslims from non-white backgrounds, more dangerous in its unfamiliarity. Their newly adopted Muslim identity is broadly viewed as incongruous with
the Western values that they were raised with, and unable to coexist in one person. Their conversion is seen as an outright rejection of a white Australian identity, culture, and way of life, which is extrapolated to conclude that white Muslim converts will be more willing to attack Australians because they no longer feel a sense of connection to Australia and the Australian people. Paternalism lies in this sentiment too; while people from non-white cultures can easily assimilate into the barbarity associated with Islamic fundamentalism, white converts need to give up their previous cultural identity and racial allegiance in order to integrate Islamic ideals in their lives.

Although converts in Australia come from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds, the perceived cultural distance between whiteness and Islam leads to an almost voyeuristic fascination with white converts, in both the Muslim and non-Muslim community. One such example lies in the public response to *Jihad Sheilas*, a documentary aired by the ABC in 2008 which features two white female converts, Raisah bint Alan Douglas and Rabiah Hutchinson, who were born and raised in Dubbo and Mudgee respectively. *Jihad Sheilas* perfectly embodies the fear of the 'normal Aussie' come convert come terrorist, as immediately evidenced in the title by the juxtaposition of 'jihad' (popularly translated as 'holy war' in the West) with the Australian slang word for woman. The ABC has been criticised for the documentary's sensationalism and use of decontextualised quotes from the women's interviews (Posetti 2008), as it portrays the women as would-be terrorists and unfit, promiscuous mothers who flit in and out of marriages having children with multiple men – suspected terrorists no less – all set to a backdrop of threatening and dramatic music. Both Douglas and Hutchinson accused the producers of deceitful and unethical conduct, claiming that they were told that
their interviews would be used in an episode of *Australian Story* that would focus on the women’s conversion and not their links to terrorist organisations (Berkovic 2008). The documentary remains the most well known documentary on converts in Australia.

Despite the periodical presence of Muslim converts in the media, there is surprisingly little academic material about their numbers or experiences within Australia, and there appears to be a sizeable gap between what is said about Muslim converts and what is actually known about them. Where research exists, it is often related to the potential for Muslim converts to become radicalised, or about their motivations for converting; less is known about their lives following their conversion and their experiences within the Muslim and broader community.

This thesis seeks to add to the existing research by investigating the research question of how white Muslim converts in Australia experience race post-conversion. Chapter One locates my thesis within pre-existing literature on Muslim converts and the theoretical landscape of racialisation and whiteness studies. My reasoning for focusing specifically on white converts becomes clearer through an exploration of racialisation as it relates to theories of whiteness as an unraced and invisible norm, unlike the highly racialised religion of Islam. In this chapter, I also outline the methodology employed in my data collection and analysis. The following chapters focus on reading the results of my empirical data in light of the theoretical claims embedded within both racialisation and whiteness studies. Chapter Two explores participants experiences within the broader white non-Muslim community, while Chapter Three focuses on their interaction with other Muslims. Through the themes
drawn from the interview data, each chapter analyses how participants' self-perception of their racial identity mediated their interactions with others, as well as how their interactions with others influenced this perception. Finally, this thesis concludes with a summary of the key themes arising from the data, and outlines the implications of this research.
Chapter 1: Theory and Methods

Theoretical Overview

This thesis seeks to explore how white Muslim converts in Australia experience race and negotiate their racial identity post-conversion. Three broad research aims are embedded in this goal: firstly, to add to the existing literature on Muslim converts in Australia, particularly in terms of their experiences after conversion; next, to contend that Islam is a racialised religion that is seen by some to be incompatible with the white Australian way of life; and lastly, to take up the invitation by academics working in whiteness studies to “make whiteness strange” (Dyer 1997: 10) and treat it as a racial identity rather than a racially neutral experience by interrogating the role of race in the lives of white converts.

Academic material on conversion to Islam has traditionally taken one of two approaches. The first of these is a historical angle that focuses on the 'Islamisation' of geographical regions as its people came into contact with Muslim empires (Levtzion 1979, Mathew 1982, Baer 2004, Talbot 2009, Mazur 2009). The second approach typically undertakes empirical research to determine the motivation and reasons informing a person’s decision to convert, drawing on multiple disciplines such as
anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Studies of the latter kind have spanned a
counties, including but not limited to Britain (Kose 1996), South Korea
(Kim 2003), France (Lakhdar & Vinnsonneau 2007), Nigeria (de Montclose 2008), the
Netherlands (Van Nieuwkerk 2008), Brazil (De Oliveira & Mariz 2006), and India
(Eaton 1993).

In recent years, however, a number of texts have shifted the focus of their study away
from the “why” of conversion to the “how,” choosing to concentrate on how converts
experience and make meaning from their lives following their conversion, rather than
the reasons underlying their conversion. More often than not, the participants in these
studies are “native” converts in Western nations (Sultan 1999, Mansson 2006). While
there is still much to explore within the field, the existing academic literature has
already attended to a diverse range of aspects of converts’ lives. One such area is the
relationship between the ethnic, national, and religious identities of converts. Jensen’s
(2008) work with Danish converts highlights the tensions between a Danish national
identity and Muslim religious identity and how converts negotiate the conflict. In
Danish society, she posits, Muslims are conceptualised as the “ultimate other” (2008:
389), which has a dramatic impact on the way that converts construct their identity. The
conflicting dynamics between converts' national and religious identities manifest
themselves through the way that they perceive self and other in contemporary Danish
society, their relationships with their non-Muslim family, and their engagement with
immigrant Muslim communities. Jensen (2008: 406) suggests that the converts'}
uneasiness with their identity and place within Danish society “expresses a submission to and an integration of the polarisation between ‘Danish’ and ‘Muslim’ identity but also a questioning of this polarisation.”

Jensen’s study is the most closely aligned with the research focus of this thesis, which attempts to gauge the ways in which white Muslim converts experience race following their conversion within an Australian context. While there already exists a substantial amount of literature on Muslims in Australia, with new research emerging consistently, studies specifically focusing on the experiences of Muslim converts are still a relatively new phenomenon in Australia. *Praying Where They Don’t Belong* (Woodlock 2010) analyses the engagements of female convert women from Melbourne with the theoretically communal space provided by mosques, arguing that gender discrimination and cultural prejudice limits convert women’s access to ethnically oriented mosques, into which category most mosques in Melbourne – and indeed, Australia – fall. Woodlock (2010: 276) posits that the domination of many mosques by different immigrant ethnic groups means that “there is no place for the culture of the Australian convert to operate.” The Australian converts she refers to are Australian Muslims from ethnic backgrounds not historically represented within Muslim communities to any great extent, predominantly those of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic heritage.

This paper aims to add a new dimension to current literature on Muslim converts, by
approaching their experiences after conversion from the theoretical frameworks offered by racialisation and whiteness studies. Racialisation has come to have multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions, much of which can be attributed to the varying and fluid conceptualisations of 'race' itself. One understanding of racialisation offered by Omi and Winant (1986: 64) sees it as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group.” Other descriptions suggest that racialisation most often occurs around perceived social problems, such as immigration and crime, that become associated with certain racial groups (Murji & Solomos 2005: 3). Goldberg (2005: 88) refuses to use the term precisely because of its ambiguity; he argues that “it is often put to work simply to suggest race-inflected social situations, those informed or marked by racial characteristics” and that as a result it lacks analytical relevance, to the point of verging on vacuousness.

The lack of consensus on the term is perhaps at least partially responsible for the criticism levelled at literature on racialisation by theorists such as Goldberg (2002:271) and Rodriguez (2000: xi), who argue that the contested nature of racialisation, the diverse meanings that it can evoke, and the different ways that it is applied by academics, has led to the development of a diluted and theoretically weak body of work. Despite such criticism, or perhaps because of it, the literature on racialisation continues to expand and evolve. Racialisation has occurred since Biblical times (Omi & Winant 1986: 61), but gained prominence from the 18th century onwards with the advent of biological determinism (Reid 2004: 36).
Miles (1989), one of the leading theorists on race and race relations, traces the idea of racialisation to Frantz Fanon’s 1967 text *The Wretched of the Earth*, although Barot and Bird (2001) have since contradicted him by noting that the first recorded use of the concept in the English speaking world took place as early as 1899. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon states that the ‘racialization of thought’ was the process through which colonialism erased differences between Africans and constructed them as one homogenous race of ‘Negro.’ Miles (1989: 76) draws on Fanon’s brief description of racialization to argue that the concept of racialization refers to the historical emergence of the idea of race and states that “the racialization of human beings entails the racialization of the processes in which they participate and the structures and institutions that result.” Miles highlights the highly politicised nature of racialisation, and argues against the notion of race altogether, stating that there are no races but only the belief that there are races. These beliefs, he contends, are what causes some groups to “construct an Other (and therefore the Self) in thought as a prelude to exclusion and domination, and by other social groups to define Self (and so to construct an Other) as a means of resisting exclusion” (Miles & Brown 1993: 43). Miles argues that it is not the criteria used for what defines a race but the very act of naming something as a race which is dangerous, and discourages the use of race as an analytical concept at all.

In contrast, Omi and Winant (1994) feel that race continues to be analytically and also *politically* significant. They argue that while it has no biological basis and is
continuously being shaped and altered by historical and social forces, the category of race is “central to everyone's identity and understanding of the world” (1994: 55) and so remains a category that needs to exist in order to be interrogated. Rather than advocating the abolition of the concept of race, then, Omi and Winant contend that race needs to be destabilised (1994: 68). Their book *Racial Formation in the United States*, first published in 1986, was groundbreaking for its time because it challenged traditional ideas of race that either saw it as an essentialised and static form of identity or as a purely illusory system of categorisation. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Omi and Winant's 'racial formation theory' asserts that racialisation is an ideological and historically informed process that is integral to the construction of a racial order that is reinforced both at the institutional level of government, big business, and mass media, and at the individual level by the ways in which people interact with each other and view their own identity. Racialisation, then, is an inherently political project, “by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (1994: 55).

The same position is taken by Troyna and Cashmore, who contend that “No matter how offensive we find race and how unimpressed we are by the scientific research on it, it remains a great motivating force behind peoples' thought and behaviour. It cannot be wished away” (1990: 26). Cashmore and Troyna focus on the development of racial typologies “from the Bible to Darwinism”, arguing that racism was, and still is, primarily used to justify slavery and other exploitation (1990: 37) throughout the ages.
Unlike Omi and Winant, however, their analysis is largely predicated on the presence of biological referents in the racialisation process. For Omi and Winant, racial ideology is built on pre-existing discursive elements within political projects that compete for authority. Their theory implies that classic biological descriptors of race need not even necessarily be present for racialisation to occur.

This is a point of contention for many working in the field of racialisation, and again links back to how different theorists conceptualise race. Banton (1987) insists that because racism has traditionally been defined by hierarchical racial typologies based on a pseudo-science which has since been discredited, the concept of racism is no longer valid and its use should be discontinued. Miles & Brown too emphasise the importance of biological references in racialisation processes, describing it as a “dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons that reproduces itself biologically” (Miles & Brown 2003: 102).

In a similar fashion, Cohen (1994) argues that modern racist discourses such as that used by the English against the Irish prior to World War II were enacted by taking a group that was not understood to be a different race to English society at the time, and racialising them by treating them like a race and referring to them using racial descriptors, “creating racism without race” (1994: 194) in the process. Cohen asserts, however, that discrimination against other groups such as Catholics and Jews in early
20th century Britain, and Muslims today, cannot be called racism as it relies on religious and cultural categories, not racial ones.

His view is challenged by those who take a broader view of race and racialisation, influenced by the “cultural turn in the social sciences and the influence of postmodernism and post-structuralism” (Murji & Solomos, 2005: 19). Contemporary discourse on race has shifted away from a preoccupation with biological differences to an understanding of race which does away with biological descriptors altogether, and focuses instead on cultural or religious differences between groups (Barker 1981, Gordon & Klug 1986, Tucker 1987, Solomos 1989). Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) deviate from the work of Banton (1987), Miles (1989), and Cohen (1994) to integrate this new concept of race and racialisation in their research. They argue that a narrow view of racialisation that refuses to entertain culturalist forms of racism overlooks the experiences of groups that are portrayed as inferior but not in ways that employ the same racial nomenclature as classical racism does. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992: 11) refer to how migrants and refugees are constructed within dominant discourses as inferior on ethnic grounds, to ultimately contend that racism does not even need to rely on racialisation but can use the notion of ‘undesirability’ to “assimilate, exterminate, or exclude.”

Cultural or ‘new’ racism relies on a belief that outsiders are ‘undesirable’, and was first used by Baker (1981) to describe the political discourse used in Britain during
Thatcher’s era, which actively avoided the use of physical or biological referents and instead relied on aggressive nation-building through a strict stance against immigration. The threat of the other to national cohesion is evoked through the language of ‘cultural difference’ rather than racial inferiority, something which is applied on an international level in the work of Huntington (1992), who argues that the primary source of conflict and threat to global security in a post-Cold War era lay not in politics or ideology but in a clash of cultures. Gordon and Klug (1986: 22) provide a concise summary of Baker’s work and the meaning of ‘new racism’:

The new racism, therefore, may be summarised as a cluster of beliefs which holds that it is natural for people who share a way of life, a culture, to bond together in a group and to be antagonistic towards outsiders who are different and who are seen to threaten their identity as a group. In this, the proponents of the new racism claim that they are not being racist or prejudiced, nor are they making any value judgements about the ‘others’, but simply recognising that they are different.

Often, this new form of racism is discussed in terms of social ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion.’ New racism is particularly relevant when discussing the conceptualisation of Islam in Australia, as successive Australian governments have not shied away from embracing Thatcher’s approach in their own political rhetoric, which has then been internalised by the broader populace. Yasmeen (2008: 55) posits that since September 2001, many Muslims have felt excluded from broader Australian society due to political discourses
that construct Muslim and Australian identities as incompatible. The majority of the responsibility for this feeling of relative exclusion was placed on the media, and to a lesser extent the Australian government, but some of the Muslims surveyed also attributed some of the blame to the Muslim community. The perceived rift between Muslim and Australian identities is seen to arise from disparate cultural and moral values, rather than through any genetically informed differences.

In the article Contemporary Racism and Islamophobia in Australia (Dunn et. al 2007: 564), the authors argue that anti-Muslim attitudes within Australia are “reproduced through racialisation that includes well-rehearsed stereotypes of Islam” and that create a “culture” rather than “colour” racism. They draw on three data sets including surveys and print media to conclude that Muslims are seen by many Australians to be culturally inferior, barbaric, misogynistic, fanatical, intolerant, and ultimately alien. Dunn et. al. contend that this perception is ultimately a racialised one that sets 'Muslim' up as a homogenous and reified identity that is incompatible with Australia as a white/Christian culture (2007: 569). Importantly, they suggest that the contemporary racialisation of Muslims is primarily derived from “observable elements of culture” (2007: 567) that are either based on clothing or phenotypical attributes, such as skin colour, having a beard, or wearing a kufi³ or hijab².

This same phenomenon is described by Michael Humphrey (2007), who chooses to use

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¹ Round brimless hat worn by Muslim males.
² Used here to refer to the Islamic headscarf.
the term culturalisation instead. He focuses on the way that both the criminal legal process and the media “culturally inflected” the now infamous gang rapes of 2000-2002 as Muslim or Lebanese (2007: 11), and asserts that Islam and Muslims are perceived to be incompatible with an Australian and Western identity, particularly in a post-911 climate. Like Dunn et. al., Humphrey notes that physical signs of religiosity such as hijab, abayas, and beards are “readily politicised” and “suspected as being surface manifestations of a deeper hidden threat” (2007: 11).

Dunn et. al. and Humphrey both primarily take a macro approach to the racialisation of Islam by addressing its enactment through institutions such as the media and court processes. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the establishment of a racial order, or a ‘racial project’ as they call it, can take place not only at the macro-level of racial policy-making, state activity, and collective action, but also at the micro level of everyday experience, and that it is through the interaction of both of these levels that a racial hierarchy can be reinforced or challenged. This thesis seeks to add to the work of Dunn et. al. and Humphrey by focusing on the way that racialisation is enacted on a micro-level, through an exploration of how it is experienced by Muslims in their interpersonal relationships with other Muslims and non-Muslims, and how it impacts on their own behaviour and perceptions of their racial identity.

To do so, I chose to conduct interviews with a sample group made up solely of white converts to Islam. My reason for focusing specifically on white converts stems from
the theory of whiteness studies that argues that whiteness is not racialised, and is instead constructed and lived by white people as a racially or culturally neutral identity (Dyer 1997: 70) because the cultural practices and privileges associated with whiteness are viewed as normative and 'commonsense,' while “race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people” (Dyer 2000: 539). Schech and Haggis (1999: 169) describe whiteness as a phenomenon that “colonises the definition of the normal and also the definition of other norms,” which Hartigan (1997) argues contributes to the perception that whiteness is the average and ideal state of existence to the point where it becomes a non-race, while those who are not white are correspondingly racialised and positioned as the 'Other.'

This thesis argues that white converts to Islam effectively move from a non-racialised, privileged identity, at least in so far as it is experienced by white people themselves, to the highly racialised category of Muslim, an identity which is constructed as incompatible with being a white Australian and marginalised as a result. Unlike non-white Muslims who will have always experienced life as racialised individuals, and unlike white 'born Muslims' who do not have a point of comparison about life as a white non-Muslim, white Muslim converts provide the ideal candidate through which to explore the notion of racialisation through conversion to Islam, as they can draw from both their non-Muslim and Muslim experiences.

As well as the claim that whiteness is natural and normative, the literature on
whiteness studies also makes two other assertions: that whiteness carries significant privilege and authority, and that much of this privilege is retained precisely because whiteness is so normalised that it becomes “…a base colour that regulates all others, a norm that spectacularly or stealthily underlies powerful social values” (Bhabha 1998: 23). However, while theorists like Bhabha (1998) and Hartigan (1997) focus on problematising whiteness as a “strategy of authority” (Bhabha 1998: 21), Frankenberg (1993: 1) argues that the decentring of whiteness necessitates viewing it as not just a structure of authority but also as an identity, and suggests reinscribing whiteness as one racial identity amongst many. Her book White Women Race Matters (1993) invites a deeper exploration of how race shapes white people’s lives, and increasingly, the study of whiteness adopts Frankenberg’s theory that whiteness derives much of its power from the very fact that it usually isn’t treated as a racial identity. McIntosh (1989) claims that this lack of recognition for whiteness as a cultural identity is what allows some white people to remain blind to their racial privilege.

It is important to note that in the Australian context, whiteness is intricately tied up with the Australian national identity. Moreton-Robinson (2005: 22) argues that the formation of Australia as a nation state was built on the dispossession of land from Indigenous people, and that through this denial of Indigenous sovereignty the Australian nation is constructed as a white possession. As evidence of the linkage between whiteness, possession, and the nation, she points to the “relationship between whiteness, property, and the law which manifested itself in the latter part of the
nineteenth century in the form of comprehensive discriminatory legislation tied to national citizenship” (2005: 27). After Australia officially became a nation in 1901, Australia continued to be constructed and enforced as a white man's land through the White Australia Policy which intentionally restricted the immigration of non-white persons up until 1973, and whiteness was racialised and marked as the identifier around which the nation was to be built.

While the first four decades of the Policy saw a preference towards British, American, Canadian, and New Zealander migrants, immigration intake was later expanded to people from Southern and Eastern Europe as well, “which necessitated the broadening of the category white (British) to that of 'European’” (Randell-Moon 2006: 3). The shifting nature of which groups of people were allowed into this category throughout history demonstrates that “whiteness as a racially signifying category is dispersed as localised and particularised according to different historical formations” (Randell-Moon 2006: 2).

A new multiculturalist outlook after the decline of the White Australia Policy has witnessed Australia’s transformation into a more ethnically diverse society, which has led to the steady deracialisation of whiteness; these days, whiteness is not racially marked but instead operates primarily as the normative understanding of what an Australian is. As such, Australia remains a white-normative and white-dominant nation, in which a vision of the national community “is constructed in terms of
whiteness, at the same time as claiming to be non-racial” (Schech & Haggis, 2000: 143). Whiteness has thus shifted from being constructed as a dominant form of existence to simply being ‘normal,’ and so continues to assert dominance in a more subtle but equally exclusive way through the marginalisation of non-white cultures.

In his book *White Nation*, Hage (1999: 20) describes the role that whiteness continues to play in the Australian nation through an evaluation of the “discourse of Anglo-decline,” found in the rhetoric of politicians like John Howard and Pauline Hanson in the mid- to late-1990s, in which white Australians lament the multicultural nature of Australia and dream of “the days gone by, the golden years of an egalitarian, white, Anglo-Celtic symbolic centrality in imaginary (and real) Australia” (McCormack 1999). Embedded in this discourse is the fantasy of a white-supremacist nation, which exists in the minds of racists and multiculturalists alike, because as Hage contends, “both White racists and White multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the national as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-white 'ethnics' are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to White national will” (1998: 18). In the case of racists, this occurs through exclusion and marginalisation, while for multiculturalists it is through their belief that they and other white people have the power to decide to welcome or tolerate ethnic others and regulate the space of the nation through their benevolence.

Moreton-Robinson (2004: 78) suggests that the cultural inscription of whiteness in
Australia has led to not only the conflation of race and ethnicity with the nation, but also with a broader understanding of 'the West' and the values it upholds, claiming that “whiteness secures hegemony through discourse by normalising itself as the cultural space of the West” (2004: 78). Integral to this cultural space are the religious and political ideals of Christianity and secularism, which also informs the Australian national identity. Former Prime Minister John Howard’s contribution to the discursive association of whiteness and Christianity throughout his administration has been well documented (Maddox 2005, Casey 2006, Randell-Moon 2006, Sunderland 2007), with reference often made to the following quote from his interview with The Australian Jewish News in 2006:

I think an Australian value is that we are a secular society in the correct meaning of the term, which is that we don’t have an established religion but not secular in the sense that our culture is not influenced by the Judaic-Christian ethic; it plainly is (Howard quoted in Sunderland 2007).

In her article 'Common Values': Whiteness, Christianity, Asylum Seekers and the Howard Government (2006: 1), Randell-Moon convincingly argues that the Howard Government's use of Christianity in its political discourse “is reflective of an investment in, and protection of, a white teleology of Australian nationalism.” The article asserts that in contrast to the nation building tactics of the era of the White Australia Policy, the Howard Government did not seek to develop the national identity
around a whiteness that was explicitly racially marked, but rather did so through references to 'common values' that are ultimately tied up in Christianity and implicitly, whiteness. Randell-Moon (2006: 11) contends that this leads to the construction of an “Anglocentric national identity where whiteness may not always be located on the body but can be an imagined investment in a system of values that associates Australianness with whiteness through Christianity.” This concept problematises the notion of white Muslim converts, who remain racially marked as white on a phenotypical level, but disrupt the normative discursive association of whiteness and Christianity.

This section of the thesis has attempted to give a broad overview of the literature on Muslim converts, racialisation, and whiteness, all of which are integral to my analysis of the experiences of white Muslim converts in Australia. The next section will outline the research methodology used to collect and analyse their stories, before moving onto Chapter Two in which I begin to analyse the data in light of the theories presented here.
Methodology

Every Muslim convert is asked about their “conversion story” at least once in their lives. More commonly, though, they are asked for their story many, many times. Over the past few years I have heard bits and pieces of a number of Muslim converts’ stories - snippets of their lives - and been privileged in that I’ve heard not only of how they came to find and embrace Islam, but also their perspectives about what came next. About joy and relief and a sense of belonging, but also about hardship, loneliness, intolerance, and isolation. About the response from loved ones, and from strangers. The post-conversion stories. Through hearing them, it became apparent to me just how rich and how diverse converts’ experiences are, and yet how strikingly similar some aspects of their journey are as well.

Their stories and experiences led to my conviction that investigating my research question in a meaningful way would require me to explore the lived experiences of white Muslim converts as told in their own words. I based my methodological decisions on the epistemological foundation offered by social constructivism. This paradigm embraces the notion that all knowledge about the world is ultimately constructed by individuals through an interactive relationship between the individual and the subject of knowledge (Rogoff 1992). An interpretivist approach to data collection is based on the implicit idea that reality is socially constructed (Husserl 1965).
and that people's perceptions of their actions, thoughts, and feelings are best understood in relation to their broader social and cultural context (Hussey and Hussey 1997), and thus it lends itself well to a social constructivist epistemology. Interpretivism is often positioned against positivism, as it privileges depth, detail, and nuance of experience over generalisability and identifiable truths (Phillimore and Goodson 2004: 157), objectives which mirrored my own aim to seek out the subjective complexities within converts' personal narratives.

My desire to explore the depth and complexity of white Muslim converts' experiences led to an embarkation upon qualitative research methods. I was interested in hearing from my research participants about how the process of conversion affected the ways in which they experienced race and racialisation, how they felt about it, how it impacted on their lives. For these reasons, I chose to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews. I wanted to allow the respondents to tell their stories in their own words, while still ensuring that particular areas were covered through the placement of open-ended questions. These areas included their demographic details, their upbringing and family life, their contact with Islam and eventual conversion, the responses and attitude of Muslims and non-Muslims following their conversion, the concept of whiteness and what it meant to them, their experiences and understanding of racism and discrimination prior to and following conversion, and how they viewed their own cultural identity.
A total of 12 interviews were conducted over the course of September 2010. The sample group was relatively diverse, although by no means was an attempt to be representative. A broad range of educational backgrounds, religious upbringings, and employment were captured in the sample group, as well as a range of affiliations to different branches of Islam. Some of the respondents were personal acquaintances, while others were recruited via the snowball method. The sample group consisted of five men and seven women, many of whom had experienced being ‘visibly’ Muslim at some point in time or all of the time while in public. In order to ensure that there were some male respondents, men were given the option that my husband be present at the interview so they were not alone with me, and all male participants took this option.

Ten of the interviewees currently live in Sydney, one in Melbourne, and one in Perth. The participants were between 19 and 42 years old, with the time since their conversion ranging from 18 months to almost 20 years at the time of interview. All of the interviewees self-identified as ‘white,’ but each person brought a unique interpretation of whiteness to the interview. The interviews were recorded with the written consent of participants to later be transcribed. Participants were also asked whether they wished for their real names to be published in the final thesis or whether they wanted to be assigned a pseudonym, with most participants taking the option to remain anonymous.

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3 Visibly Muslim is used in this thesis to refer to Muslims who purposely wear clothes that identify themselves as Muslims to other people, such as a headscarf, abaya, thawb, kufi, or turban.

4 Where quotations marks are placed around a person’s name, it is a pseudonym. Quotation marks will
Figure 1 shows the participants’ profiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years since conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Sofia, Bulgaria</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Jessica”</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alinta</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Abdul Rahman”</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Natalie”</td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Michelle”</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Rania”</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tara”</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“George”</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dana”</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of the areas I was exploring, I was prepared for some hesitation and reluctance to delve into certain subjects, such as how their families reacted to their conversion. For this reason, I attempted to create an informal and friendly environment where participants could freely and openly speak about their views and experiences in a conversational manner. I was aware that my physical appearance could potentially create some barriers to discussion whilst simultaneously opening up the possibility of others. As a dark-skinned and clearly ‘non-white’ woman, and one who identified herself as having been born and raised into a Muslim family, I


be used for the first two mentions of the name and thereafter discontinued.
understood that participants might be uncertain about conveying some of their thoughts or be particularly anxious to choose their words carefully, at the risk of offending me. For example, some participants seemed tentative about expressing their thoughts on the attitudes of Muslims from particular ethnic backgrounds, or about the treatment they received from the 'born Muslim' community at large, in case I took it as a judgement on myself. Alternatively, their knowledge about my own story encouraged them to discuss some thoughts in more depth due to an assumption that I would not have the same understanding or experience as a convert would.

Similarly, talking to a visibly Muslim woman is likely to have allowed participants to feel more comfortable talking about particular Islamic concepts or experiences of being Muslim in Australia, with the downside that some things would be assumed to already be known or felt by me and were thus skimmed over. Examples of this included participants starting to talk about issues like internal politics within the Muslim community, or references to Islamic values, and then stopping themselves by saying, “Oh, but you’ll already know this.” I attempted to mitigate these factors by asking further questions when necessary to elicit the amount of detail required, as well as by explaining my own background, knowledge, and assumptions throughout the interview, as the interpretivist calls for a dialogue between researcher and researched rather than a separation (Phillimore and Goodson 2004: 157), which I felt was an important aspect of reflexive research.
Rather than attempting to prove a hypothesis I had already established, I wanted the theory to develop from the data in the way encouraged by advocates of the methodology of grounded theory, first comprehensively described in Glaser and Strauss's 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Although it is one of the most common qualitative methodologies used today and thus often tacitly linked to a constructivist epistemology, the 'pure' grounded theory espoused by Glasser and Strauss (1967: 226) imagines the relationship between researcher and subject as one that can be separated, by assuming that it is possible to derive theory entirely from the data without allowing theoretical or philosophical opinions or values to influence the research process.

Closely linked to this assumption is a key tenet of grounded theory offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998: 9) which posits that the researcher needs to go to the field to find out *what is really going on*, a knowledge claim that firstly assumes that there is an objective reality to be found, and secondly proposes that the researcher is able to discover this reality. In contrast to this understanding of the world and how it can be known, I approached my research with the belief that such an aim was impossible, and that all research is inseparable from the assumptions and expectations that the researcher brings along with her. Instead of aiming for a neutral and value-free research process, I attempted to mitigate the effects of my personal bias by remaining reflexive throughout the process, and acknowledging where possible which of my research decisions were likely to have been tempered by my own views and perspectives.
My ontological and epistemological differences with Glasser, Strauss and Corbin did not dissuade me from approaching my data collection and analysis using the methodology of grounded theory, as I am of the view that it is still possible to use grounded theory while holding a constructivist epistemological position. Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006: 1) take this position as well, and disagree that the traditional version of grounded theory is the only correct version, contending that “all variations of grounded theory exist on a methodological spiral and reflect their epistemological underpinnings” and asserting that there is scope for a constructivist grounded theory with a more interpretive and reflexive approach to research data. Mills et. al. point to the work of Charmaz (2000: 8) who states that, “Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the 'discovered' reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts.”

In line with the grounded theory method of data analysis propounded by Corbin and Strauss (1990), I transcribed each of the interviews in full in order to capture as much data as possible. I then undertook a three-stage process of coding. Firstly, I used open coding to inductively determine codes from the transcripts by reading them and analysing them line by line. The codes derived from the first stage were then axially coded in accordance with my own thoughts on how they should be grouped, and in my own terms. Finally, I undertook a process of selective coding in which the axial codes were collected thematically and arranged as a narrative, that now forms the basis
of my thesis.

This chapter has outlined the groundwork of this project through a discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of my research. The following chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which racialisation is enacted and whiteness “made strange” through participants' interactions with non-Muslims.
Earlier this year, my husband Will had two beer bottles thrown at him while he waited for a bus in Maroubra. Along with the bottles was hurled the racial slur, “Arab dog.” During Ramadan, a carload of young men screamed “Fucking wog!” while they sped past Glebe Point Road in Sydney’s inner city; the following night, an almost identical incident occurred, but this time the men also ululated loudly out of their windows, in a mockery of a wedding tradition practised widely in Arab, Berber, and some African communities. Another time, a man spat on him from inside his car and yelled at Will to “go back to where you came from!” When Will recounted the story to me later, he jokingly added, “But I don't want to go back to Fremantle!”

Will is a white man with blonde hair and blue eyes, who traces his ancestry back to the “Celts, the Huns, and the Vikings.” He is also a Muslim, and when he dons his turban and thawb, a very visible one. When other people hear of these and similar experiences, their shocked reaction is also often accompanied by one of perplexed bemusement: “But - you’re as white as they get! Even with all the sunnah gear on, you

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5 Long tunic that reaches the feet.
6 Practices, sayings, and habits of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
still look so white. How can they think that you're Arab?” My husband is one of a
number of people who must negotiate the labels of 'white' and 'Muslim'
simultaneously in a country where the religious associations of whiteness are most
strongly linked to Christianity and where Islam is seen as a 'brown man's' religion, in a
secular climate in which public and visual forms of religion are largely frowned upon.

This chapter explores the nature of the relationships and encounters between
participants and non-Muslims following their conversion, as they relate to participants’
racial identity. I argue that the cultural association of whiteness with Christianity and
in Australia, secularism, as well as the public construction of Islam as inherently anti-
Western and incompatible with Australian values, contributes to the racialisation of
Islam which in turn racialises its adherents. For white converts, this racialisation is
particularly stark, as they begin from a position of being 'unraced' and invisible within
the culturally neutral experience of whiteness, to becoming acutely racialised in a way
that non-white people have been for centuries.

We have this saying for a person converting to Islam... 'He became a
Turk.'

Soon after Philip converted to Islam, his father pulled him aside. “He said, 'You're not

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Philip
white, Philip.' The implication was unlike himself, who was white. And I kind of made a joke about it, like, 'How can you be more white than [the Muslim] Bosnians who have blonde hair and blue eyes?’” Rather than being thrown by the statement, Philip was prepared for this questioning of his racial identity. He explains that, “In Bulgaria we have this saying for a person converting to Islam which is called, translated of course, 'He became a Turk.'” A Bulgarian convert to Islam, then, does not simply take on a new religious identity, he or she is also perceived to wear a new ethnic skin.

Phil traces the origin of the term back to the Ottoman empire’s rule of Bulgaria, and points out that prior to Ottoman conquest, Bulgarian literature was peppered with references to Arabs. He states that “the reference is more like a religious one because when they said the Arabs in Bulgarian literature you know exactly who they’re talking about, Muslims. They’re not going to differentiate between Berber Moors in Spain and Malaysians.” Rather than occurring in a social and political vacuum, the form that racialisation takes is heavily mediated by prevailing social anxieties of the time. The authors of Bin Laden in the Suburbs (Poynting et. al. 2004) argue that the modern Australian folk devil is the “Arab/Muslim Other,” as evidenced the negative representation of Muslims and Arabs by the Australian media. Poynting et. al. (2004: 4) contend that moral panics have been instigated about people of Middle Eastern ancestry since before the September 11 attacks and continue on today, and that the panic often results in a conflation of Arab or Middle Eastern with Muslim. They suggest that the media’s “highly racialised framing of current events” has the effect of
also racialising “a range of cultural practices whose only offence is their perceived
difference” (2004: 14).

Dunn et. al. (2007: 567) support this line of argument, asserting that “the contemporary
racialization of Muslims in Australia draws heavily upon observable elements on
culture” and that “racist incidents still depend on physical features for the selection of
victims.” They observe that the result of this racialisation can extend to non-Muslims
who come from a cultural background often associated with Islam, such as Christian
Arabs, reporting incidents of anti-Muslim abuse and harassment against them.

Despite the continued conflation of Muslim with Arab in the Australian media, the
interviews suggest that in interpersonal interactions between Muslims and non-
Muslims, the use of other racialised terms is also a common occurrence. Sometimes, the
abuse took the form of a general assertion that they were outsiders and not welcome in
Australia: George, Natalie, Alinta, Abdul Rahman, and Rania all alluded to incidents
where they were told to “go back to where they came from,” a command that
designated them as being foreigners on Australian soil. At other times, the
classification was more specific but still far removed from the typical Arab/Middle
Eastern nomenclature, and indicated an understanding of Islam as anything but white.
Tara recounts one such experience of this.

It’s funny because I wear a head scarf but I’m still obviously a white
woman. Like I am white. I have Anglo features, but I still get not just Islamophobic slurs but clearly racist slurs. Someone said to me, I was driving not long ago in the car, and this guy on the street yelled out – it was filthy, I couldn’t even repeat it to you, but I’ll give you the first letters - 'You effing black slut.' To me! …Like dude, obviously I’m white!

Tara laughs as she retells the story, describing it as an horrendous “but also kind of funny” experience; not because the abuse itself was humorous but because “it says so much about the way that this person understands race and racism. Simply because I had a scarf on my head, his only concept of the Other is black, you know.” She provides another, similar example that occurred while playing in a park in rural New Zealand with her daughter when another young girl came and asked if she was a Chinese person. Tara attributed her choice of words to the fact that the town was distinctly monocultural, and she had yet to come across another Muslim there, let alone one that wore a headscarf. Thinking about it, Tara reflects, “Again, it was like her only frame of reference, and you see this with so many people in that circumstance. Their only frame of reference for the other is a racialised other.”

In both cases, Tara’s headscarf precluded her from embodying a white racial identity in the eyes of others. Although she retains her “Anglo features,” Tara’s wearing of hijab symbolises to the world that she does not subscribe to the religious dimensions of whiteness, which is embedded in Christian and secular discourses (Randell-Moon 2006: 10). The responses documented above indicate that for those people, whiteness
has less to do with phenotypical attributes and more to do with observable cultural or religious practices that contradict the naturalised customs of whiteness; to them, non-conformity to 'normal' Australian modes of dress constitutes the wearer of the hijab as a non-white, racialised Other.

During George's interview, he makes it clear that he feels that Islam is a particularly racialised religion in Australia, and that people find the idea of a white Muslim to be disconcerting. “I once had an Indigenous man tell me that ‘Islam is a blackfella religion, what are you trying to prove?’ I also had a Chinese dude I used to know get really annoyed about it. He was making attacks on Islam and I was responding, he got really weirded out like, 'Who are you to be Muslim, who are you to defend them?'” George states that the majority of the abuse he receives from non-Muslims is of a racial, rather than Islamophobic, nature. He reflects that while the vilification is upsetting, his whiteness mitigates its effect: “I don't know that it hurts my soul the way that it could if I wasn’t white. I mean I feel like I can just throw it in their faces if I want to, like 'I'm like you, don’t you see how stupid you are?’” For both Tara and George, their experiences of racism serve to reinforce the subjective and constructed nature of race, and emphasise the shaky foundations upon which racism is predicated. Their statements reveal that their responses to those same experiences of racism are influenced by their self-perceived racial identity, and their whiteness is made more apparent to them in the process.
Participants also alluded to the idea that their lived experiences of whiteness, both prior to and after becoming Muslim, had an effect on how they responded to discrimination and abuse, even when it wasn't racial in nature. Tara states that she had to grow accustomed to being stared at once she lost the anonymity of being a “normal white woman,” consciously tuning it out in order to remain sane. Although she has taught herself to ignore a substantial proportion of the differential treatment she receives, Tara identifies her reaction to the racism that she does encounter and perceive as mediated by her racial identity as a white woman.

I was talking to another convert friend of mine... and she said the other thing she feels is that while she knows that she gets discriminated against because of her headscarf, she also comes with a set of assumptions about how she expects that society should treat her because of her however many years of being just an everyday white woman. You know, you expect that when you go into a shop you’ll be treated well, and so when they don’t, you’re like what the eff is this! Whereas for people who, from the moment they can remember, got ignored in shops or accused of stealing or whatever, that has to impact on, it does impact on your lived reality and how you perceive the world and your place in it.

Tara’s realisation of the privilege her whiteness afforded her came after she started wearing a headscarf, and began to notice how differently she was treated in public. Before her conversion and adoption of hijab, she states, “it’s like being a fish in a fish bowl, what do you mean there’s water here, you know, what privilege!” Tara suggests that the greatest indicator of her white
privilege was the fact that she did not know that she was privileged. In *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, McIntosh (1981: 1) refers to white privilege as an “invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious.” She lists a number of these 'assets,' which include assumptions that she has about the way that she can expect to be treated by other people, one of which includes being able to shop alone without being harassed or followed by security, as well as being able to partake in certain activities without her race being viewed as a component of it, such as swearing or speaking out against the government.

In Tara’s case, her 'assets' included not being stared at, being treated well in stores, “sailing through airport security,” and not being asked about “politics on the other side of the world, in a country you've never visited.” As an “anonymous white woman,” she states, these were things she never had to worry about; by donning the hijab, however, Tara was made acutely aware of how much she had taken for granted. Alinta’s response to experiences of racism echoes the same sentiment. She too refers to a myriad of situations where she felt that she was being treated very differently to how she was accustomed to being treated before she became 'visibly Muslim,' by people on the street, in shops, and on public transport to take a few examples.
Alinta reveals that she was often vocal about her feelings on it, particularly in the beginning stages of her life as a new Muslim, and would berate people who were rude to her or write complaint letters to stores where she had previously been treated well, but after putting on the hijab would either be ignored by sales staff or followed around the store as though she was about to steal. She associates her willingness to speak out with the expectations of society that she developed in her years as a “normal Aussie girl brought up in a typical Australian family:”

I have a feeling like I have a right to be here, so I don’t necessarily put up with crap like that. I guess if you’re coming from overseas and you don’t speak very good English you might feel a bit - second class citizen or whatever, I’m not sure. But maybe they don’t have the language to even talk back and defend themselves. I feel entitled to Australia.

Although she felt that she was treated differently when she wore a headscarf, Alinta opined that the type of treatment was often influenced by whether she was wearing an abaya\(^8\) or “more Western clothes.” When she wears an abaya, she states, people are more likely to treat her as though she is uneducated or tell her to go back to where she came from, a sentiment that Alinta finds laughable: “I put on the hijab and look in the mirror, I still see me, I still look so white to me. With my blue eyes, and even though you can’t see my hair, my skin was white... I look so Aussie!” Such cases highlight the

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\(^8\) Loose floor-length tunic.
fact that some people find it easier to simply view Alinta as an outsider, the vision of her headscarf presenting a racialised object which the bounds of whiteness cannot accommodate.

At worst I'm seen as a traitor, at best I'm seen as different. That's the fix I'm in.  

Five of the participants referred to incidents in which they were made aware that their conversion to Islam was viewed by some white non-Muslims as an act of treason. The suggestion of treason is a strong statement to make, as it implies that the act of conversion is an act of war against the white race, and that the traitor is aiding a foreign race – in this case, Islam - in helping to destroy or at the very least destabilise the white race.

Michelle recalls an incident with a co-worker at a new job:

I've been called a traitor before. I was told that I was no longer Australian 'cos I used to wear the scarf, by a co-worker when I worked at David Jones. She goes, what nationality are you and I was like I'm Australian, I'm Caucasian. She's like – but you're Muslim. She's like, when you became Muslim, you became an Arab. You're not Australian.

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9 Rania
10 The Australian Criminal Code 1995 defines treason as causing death or harm to the Sovereign, their heir apparent, their consort, the Governor-General, or the Prime Minister, or waging war against the Commonwealth, or assisting an enemy already engaged in war with the Commonwealth.
She notes that the incident took place around the time of the London bombings, describing the occurrence as “a little bit politically charged.” To Michelle, the very act of wearing hijab was viewed as a politically loaded move, even though that was far from her intentions. “I just felt I’m wearing it for me, because I want to please God, I’m not wearing it to say I support any particular political ideology or anything like that... I’m still me, I’m still Australian, I’m just covering my hair.” Michelle felt that not only did it cause her to become ‘less white’ in some people’s eyes, it also made a statement about what her newly acquired identity meant for her allegiance to her race and country. Abdul Rahman makes a similar suggestion about the connotations of the turban; referring to non-Muslims, he expresses that “the turban is that one step extra, it’s like an act of war, and they know it, they know in their heart.”

George’s interview reveals that while his parents “intellectually supported” his conversion, his extended family viewed it as a betrayal. Rather than being a phenomenon specific to his family, he felt that their reaction was likely a fairly common one amongst many white people, even if not explicitly stated. “You know, cos a lot of people will see me as being some kind of, like a traitor to the white race, especially Christians. They don’t get a white dude joining the religion of the Arabs.” Tara articulates a pervasive sense of being seen as a race traitor ever since she converted to Islam, a feeling that was confirmed soon after she appeared on a documentary broadcast on national television. An interview with her father was
included in the documentary, in which his full name was identified. Tara recalls that “some dude who had seen the documentary went through the phone book and found my dad’s phone number because his name was there and rang him and left all these horrible abusive messages on his answering machine saying, “Your daughter's a traitor.”

The idea that certain religious practices could constitute an act of race treason has been explored by Denike (2010) in her analysis of how white Mormons in America in the 19th and 20th century were racialised and castigated as race traitors for participating in polygamous marriages. Denike (2010: 856) argues that polygamy was viewed as a barbaric form of marriage that was normal for people of colour, specifically “Asiatic and African” people, but an unnatural practice for white people. She notes (2010: 863) that anti-polygamous discourses were infused with xenophobia, Islamophobia, and Orientalism, as polygamy was represented as an immoral Islamic practice that was evidence of the sexual licentiousness and lewdness of Muslims. Ertman (2010: 290) asserts that, “casting overwhelmingly White Mormons as non-White required rhetorical slights of hand. While Mormon’s distinctive theology and social organization were politically unsettling in many ways, the practice of polygamy justified the larger culture's demotion of Mormons from full citizenship on the grounds of racial inferiority.” Like white Muslims, white Mormons ceased to be white for partaking in activities that were viewed as incompatible with the normative Christian ethos, and were marginalised within the broader white community as a result.
Tara speculates that women are more likely to see her as a traitor, not just to her race but also to her gender. “I think women will look at me and my scarf and sort of think 'We fought so hard, and now look at you, setting the clock back!'” She recalls encountering this sentiment at an early stage in her life as a new Muslim, when her mother, described by Tara as a radical Christian who “likes to think that God is a Black woman,” reacted negatively to her decision to convert to Islam. While other family members were also upset, Tara felt that her mother was particularly hurt by her decision. “She would have been cool if I'd said I wanted to be Buddhist or if I was gay or anything like that. It was just 'I don't want you to be Muslim'.”

Tara attributes her mother's response predominantly to her perception of Islam's treatment of women: “I think because the only thing my mum knew about Islam was Not Without My Daughter. So you can imagine how happy she was when I said I wanted to become Muslim... She's a pretty second-wave feminist, so I think it was about, what she saw about what Islam says about women, and women's rights, and the standard sort of stuff.” Michelle also notes that the perception of female converts to Islam as being simultaneously race and gender traitors was relatively widespread, and that non-Muslims often reacted badly when she told them that she was Muslim: “People even say to me how could you do that, Islam is so bad to women... People just get really angry as well.”
Tara and Michelle's reflections on women's attitudes towards another woman's conversion to Islam are supported by a 'Racism Survey' conducted by the University of New South Wales and Macquarie University (Dunn et. al. 2004) to measure intolerance. Respondents were asked about their level of concern for a family member who chose to marry a Muslim, a Jew, an Aboriginal person, an Asian person, a Christian, a British person, and an Italian person - the first four groups used as examples of 'out-groups.' 52.8% of participants stated that they would be concerned about a family member marrying a Muslim, almost twice as many as reported concern for the next highest group, Aboriginal people at 28.9% (2004: 415).

Interestingly, out of all the attitudinal questions in the survey, it was the only question in which women's responses were more intolerant than men's, at 55.6% of women expressing concern compared to 48.9% of men (2001: 415). In a later article, Dunn et. al. (2007: 574) contend that the disparity “suggests that the stereotype of Islamic misogyny is an important component of the racialization of Islam in Australia”, as it implies that the women who expressed concern were worried about the treatment that a female family member would suffer at the hands of her husband. Dunn et. al. (2007: 574) note that this stereotype exists in Europe as well as Australia, and extends to 'ethnic Others' in general. Ho (2007: 296) takes a similar position, contending that the construction of Islam as a misogynistic 'other' is crucial to contemporary Australian nationalism. Ho (2007: 292) criticises the 'colonial feminist' attitudes implicit in the victim narratives perpetuated about Muslim women in nationalist discourses that seek to 'save brown
women from brown men’ (2007: 294), and use women's rights as a justification for conceptualising Islam as culturally inferior. The attitude of women who view white female converts as simultaneously gender and race traitors operates on this same premise, and demonstrates that racialisation is experienced in gendered ways (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993: 125).

...but you, you should know better...\

As evidenced by Tara and Michelle's experiences, Islam continues to be seen by many as a primitive, barbaric, and ultimately culturally inferior monolith, rife with misogyny and violence. George, Rania, and Tara all suggest that the horror and anger directed towards white people converts to Islam do not only signify a superior attitude towards Muslims, but also to non-white people more generally. For white people to become Muslim is a 'step down' for them, to a harsh culture untouched by the Enlightenment, devoid of compassion, and lacking in basic human freedoms – that white people “should know better” featured in each of their narratives. As George attests:

I get so many white people reacting to my conversion like 'You should know better.' They always assume it was for a woman or something else. You know, I’m white therefore I could never take on something so foreign, I’d have to be mad! But of course being casually Buddhist is fine, ha!

11 Tara
Buddhism is juxtaposed here with Islam as an example of a 'good' Eastern religion which is compatible and in sync with Western values. George “should know better” than non-white Muslims, including non-white converts, because he has been blessed with the wisdom that his white Western upbringing affords him. He adds that even well-meaning white converts offer paternalistic assumptions about non-white cultures, stating that they “love to dismiss things that are Islamic but they don’t agree with as ‘just cultural’, as though culture is somehow more worthy of denigration.”

The assumption that the conversion must have taken place for a partner is a common one, presumably driven by a desire to try and rationalise the oddity of taking on a religion with as much perceived cultural distance from whiteness as Islam. Jessica recalls that when she took off her headscarf after wearing it for around 8-9 months, “a few people were like, oh so did you like break up with your boyfriend, are you not together anymore? And I was like, I’m still Muslim!!! And we’re engaged. So leave it at that.” Michelle describes the same reaction when people first find out that she’s Muslim, saying that “the first question I always get asked is are you married to a Muslim? Do you have a Lebanese husband?”

Both Michelle and Jessica express feelings of disgust and insult at the assumptions that this made about their intelligence, taking umbrage to the suggestion that they only converted to Islam because they were weak-minded, submissive, and didn’t have opinions or beliefs of their own. Jessica adds that the assumption that she must have
taken off her scarf because she was no longer with her Muslim boyfriend could also have stemmed from a belief that she had only worn it because he was “oppressing [her] and making [her] wear it,” aligning perfectly with Western fantasies of Islamic misogyny and ethnic patriarchy (Dunn et. al. 2007, Ho 2007).

Both Rania and Tara suggested that the idea that white people should know better is closely linked to the conceptualisation of conversion to Islam as an act of race and gender treason. As Tara explains:

There’s definitely a sense – and it’s a paternalist sense I guess, that there’s this idea that ‘Oh those poor non-white people, they don’t know any better because they’re ignorant, they were raised with these silly beliefs, but you, you should know better’, and so there’s this paternalism towards non-whites, and then also the rage towards someone like me as a white person choosing what they find so objectionable.

Rania states that she feels that white converts are seen as more confronting than non-white converts to Islam, a sentiment shared by the majority of the participants. George attributed it in large part to the uncertainty fostered by the destabilisation of racial boundaries, suggesting that it caused people to feel unsettled and anxious about their own place in the world, sometimes triggering aggressive reactions. The concept of destabilisation and unsettlement also arises in Rania’s narrative:
And the thing is that we do have solidarity with them in that we are from the same race, whereas it is so easy, just what the workings of racism are like, it's so easy for them to dismiss another race and dismiss another culture and dismiss the religion along with it, but when someone of your own race comes into that religion, it kind of throws things off balance for them. And I think to a large extent there is the expectation that we should know better and we're not like them and when you extrapolate that it becomes even worse, oh well you're traitors. That's when vilification really happens.

This chapter has sought to outline some of the key responses that participants received from non-Muslims as it related to their racial identity. Being white and being Muslim is viewed by some non-Muslims to be incompatible identities. The next chapter explores white converts' experiences within the Muslim community.
Chapter 3: Experiences with Muslims

At the beginning of this research project, I was fairly confident that at least one or two of the white converts I interviewed would reveal some insight into the ways that the broader non-Muslim community racialised Islam and Muslims, as I had witnessed such examples on both a personal and community level myself. What I wasn’t expecting was the same process of racialisation being enacted by Muslims themselves. Perhaps in part it was because I grew up knowing an Islam in which “...an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action” (al-Baihaqi) to quote the last sermon of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). I have read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* countless times since I was a teenager, and while each reading brings tears to my eyes, I never cry more than when I read this paragraph:

...I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) - while praying to the same God with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of the blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the ‘white’ Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana (1965: 419).
Both of these Muslim role models refer to an Islam that does not discriminate as to colour, ethnicity, or nationality, and being surrounded by Muslims from all parts of the globe over the last five years has normalised this experience of Islam for me. That is not to say that I believed that Muslims were unable to be racist, far from it. But the idea that anyone, from any cultural background, could become Muslim, was something that I had never questioned. However, the interviews highlighted that for some Muslims the idea of a white Muslim is a foreign concept, while others glorify them in a way that non-white converts do not experience to the same extent.

In this chapter, I outline the ways in which the Muslim community’s racialisation of Islam manifests itself in its treatment of and attitudes towards the white converts in my study. I contend that for many Muslims from migrants backgrounds, Islam is so intricately entwined with their cultural identity and history and so far removed from their understanding of whiteness and Western cultures, they find it difficult to comprehend the notion of a white Muslim. As a result, white converts are either viewed as ‘de-whitened,’ or as not really being true Muslims; each understanding works within the paradigm of whiteness and Muslimness as mutually exclusive identities. The chapter finishes with an exploration of how some participants respond to the attitude that white converts are better Muslims if they assimilate into a non-white ethnic culture.

I’m sure you’re Lebanese, you’re so like us!12

12 Michelle
When Michelle describes her experiences as a white convert, she draws parallels between the way in which her racial identity is perceived by the Muslim community and broader society, suggesting that Muslims are just as likely to view her as Arab or non-white as non-Muslims are. “People that know that I’m Muslim really label me as Muslim, and I see myself as almost Arab in their eyes. And even like other friends of mine, that are Muslim and Arab as well, they’re like, ‘Oh but, you are like us! I’m sure that you are Lebanese, you are one of us, you can’t tell the difference.’” Michelle feels that in many ways she has become “Arabised,” which for her means having learnt to “blend in culturally very well with Arabs” and “cope in their particular culture.” She actively embraces many aspects of Arab culture such as food and social customs and visualises having “the big Arab wedding.” She shares a number of stories to illustrate her point, including one about the brother of a man she is getting to know for marriage:

His little brother’s quite young and he speaks with me, but he always says to me, ‘Oh but you’re Lebanese now...’ He just doesn’t get it. He knows that I converted, he knows that I’m technically Australian, but even he himself doesn’t see me as it. He’ll make comments about Australians in front of me, he’ll say, ‘Oh those Australians do blah blah blah’ ...He doesn’t see me as being Australian, because I don’t do what they do.

Abdul Rahman recounts similar experiences with Muslims who struggled to make sense of a white Muslim. He states that when he first began his work placement, both
students and staff thought that he was Jewish because of his beard and kufi, which
they mistook for a Jewish yarmulke. He attributes the confusion that ensued when
they found out that he was Muslim to growing up in non-religious households
where Islam was purely a cultural identifier, and so Islam was always linked to
particular ethnocultural groups.

...they can’t conceive that you are Muslim, because if they have identified
your ethnicity correctly, then you can’t be Muslim. If they have identified
you as a Muslim then you can’t be white, you have to be Turkish or Bosnian
or Lebanese... *anything* but a Caucasian person.

A number of other participants also attested to the disbelief and incredulity that
accompanies the idea of a white Muslim. Shawn states that he considers it racist when
restaurant workers question his need to know whether the food they are serving is
halal, saying that as a white person he is “expected to do certain things” which do not
include eating halal food. George reports a similar incident when buying a kebab,
wherein the man serving him angrily replied, “Why you ask this?” and refused to
believe that George was Muslim. As an explanation for the server’s aggressive attitude,
George suggests that “I think some people really think of Islam as such an integral part
of their cultural heritage that they can’t help but get upset when a white person is
Muslim, it’s like, dammit, can’t we even have this to ourselves?”

The experiences of Michelle, Abdul Rahman, Shawn, and George illustrate a trend
within the Muslim community to automatically associate Muslims with particular
ethnocultural backgrounds, in which whiteness cannot play a role; or conversely, find it difficult to believe that a person is Muslim if they’re seen to be white. In part, this attitude can be linked to an underlying discourse amongst Muslims that constructs the West as diametrically opposed to the values and way of life espoused by Islam, and as such struggles with the notion of a white person becoming a Muslim. This explanation is explored in more depth in the following section. Another possible reason relates to the specific nature of the Australian migrant Muslim community. Humphrey (2001: 35) contends that Australian Islam is both pluralising and homogenising: “pluralising through the migration process that has generated local, ethnic, community-based Islamic religious institutions,” highlighting the multiplicity of cultures that make up the Muslim community, but also homogenising through “the essentialisation of culture as a defensive, as well as representational, strategy that tends to place ethnic culture in compartmentalised social space.” While on the surface this ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1987) can look like a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that marginalises the group in question, it ultimately creates an identity around what it is not. The cultural production that ensues masks the diversity and plurality within the group in order to construct a static, timeless, and united cultural front against the Other, rather than acknowledging and celebrating the hybrid and fluid identities that migrant diasporas adopt (Hall 1990).

Amongst first-generation Muslim immigrants, Humphrey (2001: 39) notes, the absence of established religious authorities when they first arrived in Australia meant that individual ethnic communities built institutions around their immediate needs. He
uses the mosque to exemplify his argument, referring to the multiple ethnically defined
mosques around Australia, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, and arguing that
“mosque development has also tended to reinforce the ethnic focus of religious life”
(2001: 39). The make-up of Australian Islamic institutions is changing, however, as
more and more Muslims that have been born and/or raised in Australia take part in
creating a range of new, de-ethnicised initiatives such as the Al-Ghazzali Centre, the
Córdoba Institute, the Imam Husain Islamic Centre, the Global Islamic Youth Centre,
and the Al-Kauthar Institute, to take a few prominent organisations from Sydney
alone. However, even a cursory glance at the member councils of the peak body of
Muslim organisations in Australia, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils,
highlights that ethnicised Islamic institutions continue to play a prominent role in the
face of Australian Islam, particularly in urbanised spaces that have seen higher rates of
migrant settlement.

Woodlock’s (2010: 276) research on female Muslim converts and their access to
mosques indicates that white Muslim women are more likely to feel excluded from
mosque spaces: as women, because many mosques failed to cater for the needs of
women and often allocate them cramped spaces for prayer, or prevent them from
attending altogether; and as white Muslims, because of the ethnically-determined
nature of Melbourne mosques that meant that “cultural clashes and language barriers”
made some women feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in some mosques (2010: 276).
Woodlock (2010: 276) contends that “there is no place for the culture of the Australian
convert to operate,” by which she means that Australian Muslims from ethnic
backgrounds not typically associated with Islam, such as Celtic and Anglo-Saxon, are encouraged to choose between being Australian and being Muslim, and may feel pressured to “adopt Arabic names; wear Middle Eastern or Asian clothing; and follow non-Australian prescriptions for gender relations” to prove their legitimacy as Muslims (2010: 276).

The above examples demonstrate that for some Muslims it can be easier to understand white converts by racialising them, because they themselves see Islam as a racialised religion. While sometimes the act of racialisation is encouraged through following particular customs, as Woodlock describes, at other times it reflects a particular understanding of power and privilege and how much of each is retained or given up by the white convert. Sean’s upbringing had taught him that using the word 'Paki' to describe his Pakistani friends would have had him “clobbered” given the racist connotations of the term in Great Britain. However, he recalls that “quite early on, on Muslim Village there was a British Pakistani girl who asked me why I was saying ‘people from the Indian Subcontinent’ when I was actually talking about ‘Pakis’, and I said, ‘I don’t think it’s appropriate to say that word’. She replied, ‘Well you’re a Muslim now, you’re an honorary Paki.’”

Sean remarks that at the time her attitude surprised him, but he took it in stride. While a white person using the term Paki would have been considered racist and offensive, Sean's white privilege was eroded by his conversion to Islam, which for this woman was also a default conversion to 'Paki-dom' - if not literally, in the sense that he was
now equally as underprivileged and marginalised. While both Sean and the woman on the forum spoke from a British experience, the same can apply in Australia given the relatively lower socioeconomic status of Muslims in Australia overall (Hassan 2008) and the higher rates of racism and discrimination against them (Poynting & Noble, 2004).

Philip too notes that some types of language and forms of behaviour and performance, such as jokes about different cultural groups, are seen as acceptable because “some Muslims will be pulling me more into the brown people category, which I don’t mind;” however “there is a risk that one person will definitely not feel that way.” Philip uses the example of racially offensive terminology to illustrate his point: “I know quite a few Muslims that use the N word – not in like a derogatory way but in a kind of hip hop reference, maybe they’re Pakistani, or Arab; but if I say it, even though I’m Muslim, some people will just look and see white person saying that word.”

For Philip, the appropriateness of using “the N word” depends on the amount of privilege that one holds in society, because while for a privileged white person to use the word simply reinforces its historical usage to control and subjugate people of colour, someone from a group who has had the word used against them before, either historically or currently, may ‘reclaim’ it to “clear a space for linguistic empowerment and communal privilege” (King 2007: 107). While some Muslims may accept his use of the term because of the vilification he is subjected to as a Muslim, others view it as offensive and inappropriate because they ultimately still see him as a white man.
Because of the conflicting opinions he receives, Phil struggles to understand where his place is in the discussion of privilege: “If I identify as white, sometimes I have Muslims who say to me, 'Oh you're privileged because, basically your skin colour's white'. And then you have people like my dad who tell me that I'm not white. So it seems that you get the short end of the stick on both sides.”

Tara also describes feeling unsure about how to handle the issue of privilege, especially when talking to non-white Muslims. She confesses that it wasn't until she began to wear a headscarf that she recognised her white privilege, and that even though she feels that some of white privilege is now negated because of her visibility as a Muslim, there still exists a basic premise of privilege that she can't deny. Tara points out that her headscarf is ultimately removable, and even though she has no intention of removing it, she retains her white privilege by “just being cognisant of the fact that if I ever wanted to take off my headscarf and walk down the street, all white privileges would ultimately, instantly return.”

Part of Tara's confusion stems from what she sees as “the growing undercurrent of anger at the white person in our Muslim community.” She states that while she understands the motivation behind it from people of colour, and accepts it, she still finds it difficult to deal with because she feels that she is shunned by both the wider and Muslim communities; one for being Muslim, and the other for being the “archetypal white privileged person” who is “despised everywhere.” When asked if she feels that Muslims include her in that category, she admits to being unsure, but
states that if what they’re angry at is the privilege that white people receive, she can’t deny that she is privileged. Tara feels that her white privilege precludes her from being viewed as non-white by other Muslims.

You’re always the convert, you’re never really the real Muslim.\textsuperscript{13}

During their interviews, Sean, Tara, Michelle, and Rania all referred to being subject to two “extreme” reactions on the spectrum of Muslim responses to their conversion. In the words of Sean, “We get treated in different ways. You have the ’Mash‘Allah\textsuperscript{14}, subhan’Allah\textsuperscript{15}, *cries*, I wish I could have his iman\textsuperscript{16}’ and then you have the other side: ’Bah! He’ll be drinking beer next year.’ You’ve got both, and it’s very hard to penetrate either of those stereotypes.” The stereotypes that Sean refers to reflect two different but arguably related conceptualisations of whiteness. In one, as Rania attests to, white converts are glorified and viewed as better Muslims than those born into Muslim families, which she states makes her feel uncomfortable. Sarah shares a similar view, opining that “some people are so amazed by it and that in itself is discrimination? It’s positive but it’s still like you’re white, you’re Muslim, that’s so amazing.” For Sarah, the idea that being a white Muslim is somehow a novel or particularly strange occurrence worthy of special praise effectively essentialises the concept of whiteness and constructs it as something unfamiliar to Islam and Muslims.

\textsuperscript{13} Tara
\textsuperscript{14} As God has willed
\textsuperscript{15} Glory be to God
\textsuperscript{16} Faith
Tara suggests that even amongst Muslims who glorify white converts, there still exists a sense of what she terms “uneasy ambivalence” towards them.

On the one hand they’re like ‘Oh wow! This is so amazing – look at Sheikh Hamza, he’s so validating!’ ...People love, they love the white celebrity, and they love - ‘Oh tell us your conversion story.’ ...But there’s also this sort of unease, that you’re never really a proper Muslim, you’re always the convert, and you never really know much about the religion, and whenever white people raise legitimate concerns about practices they might see happening in the community like anyone else would, suddenly you’re the white person that’s come in and trying to change our religion, and who are you, whitey?

In Tara’s opinion, white people are viewed as never quite being able to attain the status of an ‘authentic’ Muslim, and are constantly being educated by ‘real’ Muslims who consider themselves more knowledgeable as a result of their birth. While most of the interviewees acknowledged that their understanding of Islam was more limited than the Muslims they knew when they first converted, with the exception of those who had spent a long time researching and studying Islam before they took shahada, those who had been Muslim for some years questioned the patronising attitude which some Muslims took towards them. Phil observes: “If you’re a Turk from Turkey most people are not going to come up to you and be like, ‘Do you know how to pray?’ or ‘Have you been on Hajj?’”

17 ‘Testification’, a phrase describing the act of conversion to Islam through a public declaration of belief.
Phil expresses disappointment and annoyance with the assumptions that Muslims make about it, stating that it starts off from a standpoint that Islamised cultures make for better Muslims. Phil also highlights the inverse of this view, in which the less white someone becomes, the better a Muslim he or she is perceived to be. To demonstrate, Phil makes reference to an incident in which a friend told him that he no longer saw Phil as white, which to him was a compliment about Phil’s religiosity and practice because he associated whiteness with being a non-Muslim.

Michelle refers to similar treatment, stating that people constantly question her commitment to the religion because of her whiteness, and ask her whether she knows about basic laws in Islam such as alcohol being haram. She feels that despite other Muslims’ insistence that “everyone loves converts” and “everyone wants a white wife,” born Muslims and non-white converts have a much easier time within the Muslim community because people are less likely to wonder about their past or question their upbringing; it is assumed that they will be able to adapt to a Muslim way of life more seamlessly than a white convert. Michelle expresses frustration at the Muslim community’s attitude towards her: “I just want to stop being a convert, I just want to be Muslim. Because I’ve been Muslim for nearly 9 years, it’s just ridiculous, like when am I going to stop being the convert?”

Duderija (2010) explains this phenomenon amongst Muslims living in Western countries through a paradigm that he terms the ‘self-other civilisational boundary’
mutual identity construction dialectic,’ in which the Self constructs its self-identity in reference to how it is perceived by the Other, and also how it thinks it is perceived by the Other. In his framework, the ‘Self’ is Islam as a civilisational ‘ummah’ or community, and the Other is the West, a civilisational entity historically informed by Christianity. His position is supported by Randell-Moon’s (2006: 11) assertion that dominant public discourses in Australia constructs whiteness and the West as inextricably tied up in Christianity. She contends that “the Orientalist assumption that constructs the West in opposition to Islam works to homogenise differences within each binary term and link the West and Islam to a corresponding set of essentialised representations” (2006: 8).

Randell-Moon (2006: 8) argues that public discourses within Australia characterise religion in racialised ways, which are then “understood to relate culture and morality to nationality along a binary of Christianness-Australianness and Other.” In light of her position and Duderija’s assertion that Muslims living in the West construct their identity around how they feel they are perceived by the West, it is arguable that Muslims who find it difficult to comprehend the idea of a white or ‘Australian’ Muslim have internalised the logic described by Randell-Moon and set up racialised boundaries around religion themselves. In the participants’ examples above, then, the whiteness of the participants renders them attached to the Christianity, and unable to ever become a true Muslim as their faith will always be in question.

Arguably, the idea that Islam and whiteness are mutually exclusive also revolves
around the belief that whiteness and Western culture are at a very base level
inextricable from the haram and immorality, and that anyone who has been born into it
is tainted and can never completely amputate that part of their identity, regardless of
their individual life histories. Waardenburg (2003: 48-49) lists five assumptions that
underlie contemporary Muslim discourse about the West, referring to different
historical periods and geopolitical locations to analyse the multiple messages inherent
in four types of discourses: the political, cultural, spiritual, and socio-economical. The
assumptions particularly relevant to this study include the idea of the Orient and the
Occident as mutually exclusive opposites that are reified and essentialised, with the
West representing “a disintegrating society in which egoism and human solitude
prevail... the land of loss of soul, where secularity dominates and people drift without
deeper norms and higher values” (2003: 249).

Current Muslim discourse thus constructs white Westerners as inherently irreligious
and immoral, and even conversion is not necessarily enough to rescue them from this
label as it is always assumed that they will revert to un-Islamic practices. Michelle feels
that the main reason people find it hard to accept her as a true Muslim is because they
associate her whiteness and “Aussieness” with haram activities, such as drinking
alcohol. She points out that she had a relatively conservative, strict upbringing where
noone drank in the house because her parents were both religious Christians, but that
even when she tells other people this, “Muslims still think I’ve had this wild
upbringing where I’ve been allowed to do what I like... Because I’m Australian they
have these ideas about you.”
Michelle uses the example of her ex-husband to demonstrate her point. She recalls that soon after they were married he told her to take off her scarf, and insisted that she had to listen to him because he was her husband. His demands escalated quickly; he began to try and persuade her to go to clubs with him, drink alcohol, and take drugs. When Michelle refused and told him that she had never taken drugs or drunk even before she became Muslim, he threatened to force her by putting ecstasy in her drink. Michelle suggests that he and other men like him choose to marry white converts because they think that white women will be more likely to condone and practise impermissible acts themselves, so the men can look respectable in front of their families whilst committing haram with the blessing of their wives.

Philip recounts that “I’ve had Muslims tell me that Muslims have been able to assimilate other cultures into... like, Islamise other cultures, but this modern, Western, whiteish culture is something different and it can never be assimilated.” He skeptically adds, “which obviously I point out to them that the Muslim world has its bellydancers and honour killings so I don’t know how Islamised they are.” Michelle opines that the hypocrisy and judgemental essentialism implicit within such attitudes are not uncommon amongst the Muslim community, and that they form a hard perception to break. Referring to a recent incident where someone asked her if she was 'really' a Muslim, she states: “I just felt like, who are you to ask me if I’m really Muslim? Are you really Muslim? How much do you practise your deen? Just because I’m white and I don’t wear the scarf doesn't mean anything, cos a lot of these people do a lot of other
haram in public and think it’s ok.” Shawn remarks that he has encountered the same attitude, particularly when looking for a wife:

...we wanted to get married so she took me to her family. And basically they said, 'You're not Muslim cos you're white.' And I was like well hold on, I've been learning about Islam for like three or four years, a couple of years even before I converted... I've got tattoos, I'm a smoker, but you see me praying five times a day, I pray at work, I go to the mosque as often as I can, I go to lectures as often as I can, I'm also reading documentaries, trying to learn. And for them to say straight off the bat, 'Oh you're not Muslim', it's like, what?

The experiences of Michelle, Phil, and Shawn highlight that the conception that being white and being Muslim is a paradox is not simply restricted to the non-Muslim community, and that Muslims also partake in racialising projects. Their stories support Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation, as Omi and Winant (1986: 72) contend that it is not only dominant groups that engage in racial projects, but marginalised groups in society can also adopt racialised modes of thinking about themselves and about others in order to band together against discrimination and subordination.

How much of a convert is she if she behaves like that?

Implicit within the belief that white converts are pseudo-Muslims or 'bad' Muslims is the inverse assumption that ethnic cultural practices and identities are better suited to
Islam. Rania states that while she has only ever had one person explicitly say that she cannot be a proper Muslim because she is white, she feels that she is more readily accepted by the Muslim community if she adopts customs that are traditionally associated with a more Islamised cultural group.

Overall I just found the more Australian I acted, the more Anglo I acted, the more of a divider it became between me and them. And in some ways the more Australian I acted it almost became like, well, how much of a convert is she if she behaves like that? Muslim girls should behave like this... I did try and understand their culture a bit more and try and fit in with the sort of ideal. The more cultural I was, the more I was like them culturally, the more socially acceptable I became.

Rania articulates that she feels that Islam is a “highly racialised” religion in Australia, and that the more racialised she became the more Muslims accepted her as one of them; the largest change for her culturally, she says, was adapting her interactions with the opposite sex, something that Woodlock (2010: 276) found amongst converts in her study as well. Rania notes that her experience has largely been influenced by her interaction with the Pakistani community, as the mother in the family that she now lives with is Pakistani. Although she recognises that some of the cultural practices that she feels pressured to conform to are not strictly required by Islam, she is happy to embrace them in order to “meld into the culture and community.”

Rania remarks that after converting to Islam, she had to actively leave behind some
aspects of her white culture, not because she was being rebellious or wanted to cause
defence to her biological family but because it was necessary in order to implement
Islam in her life because they actively contradicted Islamic commandments. Rania
states that it was hard for some of her family to understand; she refers in particular to
her aunt, who “...did not like that I could not live what she saw as a typical Australian
lifestyle. She thought it was important for me to drink and experiment with drugs, she
thought it was important for me to go and sleep with guys, she thought it was
important for me to have these sorts of experiences.”

In a similar fashion, Natalie chose to embrace some of the customs of her husband’s Sri
Lankan culture, such as learning to speak Sinhala, adopting everyday etiquette and
customs, eating and cooking Sri Lankan food, and wearing Sri Lankan dress. She
discussed her participation in the Sri Lankan community in the language of integration
and harmony, although she notes that in the beginning there was some confusion from
the Sri Lankans that she met through her husband. “Initially they weren’t quite sure
what to expect because the idea of a white person is someone who doesn’t practise any
religion, not very clean, so I had to help them also understand about me, rather than
looking at me and saying ‘Oh you’re from white society, therefore you must be the
same as everyone else’.” Natalie describes the relationship between culture and religion
as one of symbiosis, stressing that: “...you have the religion and the culture, it doesn’t
have to clash, people try to make out that it clashes but it doesn’t have to clash, because
I have no clashes between religion and culture. I think it gets on fine.” Later it becomes
clear that when she refers to culture, she doesn’t include Australian culture.
In the media they say that – we Muslims we should adopt the Australian culture and the Australian lifestyle and so forth, but we have particular dress codes, we have particular food requirements, we have particular requirements for prayer and how we pray and where we pray has to be clean, and so forth. And a lot of things they don’t understand.

While Rania and Natalie both readily embrace aspects of Islamised cultures, Philip actively rejects the idea that white converts should adopt different ethnic or cultural identities. He states that part of his desire to develop and assert his white identity stemmed from a resistance to assimilating into another culture, the two options he saw available to him after conversion: “...if you convert and you become Muslim, you’re either going to have some sort of understanding of what your racial or cultural identity is, or you’re going to become one of those people who adopt one of the Muslim cultures. And I really viewed the second one as very negative.” He offers a number of reasons for rejecting the latter, many of them founded in his disagreement with the idea espoused by some Muslims that “whatever the Arabs did, or other highly Islamised ethnic groups, it was kind of legitimate or more legitimate than quote unquote ‘this kufr’

Philip sought to demonstrate that converts could retain their cultural identity whilst still being a practising Muslim, to counter the idea that white cultures are not as religiously acceptable as non-white cultures, indicating that if anything, he had “a

19 ‘Disbelief’, ‘disbelieving’.
thousand and one problems with Muslim cultures” that pushed particular points of view and codes of behaviour under the guise of Islam when they had no or little religious support for it.

Philip describes feeling more comfortable with Afghans and other Muslims who don’t have a cultural attachment to their ethnicity and can relate more as an Australian, as he does. Philip advocates the development of a white racial identity, but he describes in acultural terms; being Australian is viewed as having no cultural dispositions either way. Abdul Rahman, too, promotes the notion of embracing an Australian Muslim identity. His experiences with Muslims reinforced the need for an indigenous Islam by developing “a stronger Australian identity so that we can get rid of these ethnic mosques” and the divisions that they create within the Muslim community. For Sean, this “Australian” Islam was witnessed in Perth, where the small numbers of Muslims meant that there was a stronger sense of Muslim brotherhood and sisterhood unlike Sydney’s ethnically determined initiatives and institutions.

Sean uses the example of his own marriage to demonstrate, stating that he had to “jump through hoops to get into an Arab family” and that if his wife had not been married before, her extended family would not have even considered him. He puts this down to an “old-school thing, because they’re the immigrant generation as opposed to the Australian generation,” noting however that in cities with large Muslim communities the same attitude was being passed down to the “Australian generation” as well.
In the above examples, the participants reject adopting an Islamised culture, choosing instead to embrace an Australian identity as they visualise Australianness as a culturally neutral terrain where Muslims can practise a purer Islam untainted by ethnocultural baggage. A growing literature is emerging that discusses the trend towards “de-ethnicising” Islam practised by second-generation immigrant Muslims in Western nations that aim for an Islamic revival, termed 'newer Islamic movements' by Lars Pedersen (1997). Humphrey notes that in Australia, this revival is being driven by “non-political, ascetic and de-ethnicised movements engaged in proselytisation” (2010: 133), namely Tablighi Jama’at and Jama’at Dawaah Islamiah. However, neither Abdul Rahman, Philip, nor Sean, subscribe to the views of either of these organisations, and indeed in some cases fervently reject their ideological and theological claims.

This chapter has sought to identify the ways in which the participants' micro-level interactions with people in the Muslim community were mediated by and shaped participants' self-perceived racial identity. It has argued that some Muslims in Australia have internalised the popular racialised construction of Islam and whiteness as incompatible, because of whiteness's links to Christianity and Western values, which influences their perception of white converts to Islam. White converts are thus viewed as either becoming non-white through the process of their conversion, or not being true Muslims, as whiteness and Muslimness are viewed as mutually exclusive, in a similar way to the perceptions of non-Muslims in Chapter 2. In order to be seen as 'better' Muslims, some participants adopted customs of Islamised cultures, while others
actively rejected that form of assimilation as they felt if anything, coming from a
culturally neutral position would allow them to practise Islam in better and truer ways.
The conclusion of this thesis summarises how participants’ interactions with Muslim
and non-Muslim individuals impacted on their perception of their racial identity.
Conclusion

During his interview, Philip asks a poignant question: “Where exactly do white Muslims fit into the whole race thing?” By drawing on the narratives of white converts and their experiences of race post-conversion, this thesis seeks to contribute to the conversation that his question inspires. Over the last two chapters I have outlined the different ways in which race plays a role in the lives of white converts, how others view them racially, and how they negotiate their racial identity as a result. All participants discussed encounters and attitudes in which they had been racialised for being Muslim; some by other Muslims, some by white non-Muslims, others by both. All participants also described the diverse and sometimes overlapping ways in which they responded to the racialisation they experienced.

For some white converts, the answer to Philip’s question is that they don’t fit in. Michelle explains that she feels “very white” around Muslims, whereas “when I’m with Australians I don’t see myself as white. At all.” She suggests that as a white convert you “stop belonging to either side... you don’t truly belong to either,” referring to an “other space that you dwell in, in the middle.” While for Michelle the feeling of not belonging is viewed as negative experience, Jessica describes it as “kind of cool” that she doesn’t “feel particularly completely in one group or completely in another in
terms of culture or fitting in,” which she attributes to the fact that most of her friends are from a range of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Tara sees it as a “both sides of the fence kind of thing;” her main concern with regards to her identity as a Muslim is the role that the power and privilege that her whiteness affords her plays within it, and how she should negotiate that in her day to day life.

As well as drawing attention to the experiences of white converts to Islam in both Muslim and wider communities, this thesis draws broader conclusions about the conceptualisation of race, racialisation, and Islam in contemporary Australia. The interviews demonstrate that Islam is a highly racialised religion, not only in Western [...]

Orientalist fantasies that homogenise all that is seen as non-Western and non-white, but also within Muslim discourses about the West that construct it as materialistic and void of spirituality. White converts provide an experimental group to illustrate this racialisation. Within the broader community, their adoption of a religion that is seen as antithetical to Western values and beliefs either diminishes or eradicates their whiteness in others’ eyes, or alternatively sees them labelled as race traitors who act against and destabilise the white race, and in today’s geopolitical context are thus viewed as more likely to become terrorists. White converts are also condemned for they “should know better,” which translates to a patronising attitude towards non-white Muslims, whose affiliation to the perceived cultural inferiority and barbarity of Islam is readily accepted. Such perceptions of white converts and Muslims more generally reflect Ash’s description of the two dominant prisms through which the West
views Muslims: “the terrorism paradigm and the backwardness paradigm” (Ash 2006 p. 13).

The Muslim community also struggles to understand the notion of the white Muslim convert, who is perceived to be tainted with the West on a biological level that the act of conversion cannot overcome. White converts are either only understood when they are racialised; or alternatively, for those that cannot see past their whiteness, they cannot be viewed as Muslims and are treated with suspicion as pseudo-Muslims. For this reason, some white converts are likely to embrace certain cultural expectations in order to feel more accepted within the Muslim community and avoid the judgement that comes with remaining 'Australian.' Conversely, others actively reject the invitation to adopt the customs of another ethnic cultural group, because they feel that it is no less religiously acceptable to retain their whiteness.

This phenomenon illustrates Antheas and Yuval-Davis’s (1993) argument that racialisation in contemporary times has moved away from using biological rationale and phenotypical descriptors to understand race, and that these days races can be and are constructed out of groups that could never otherwise satisfy the criteria of a race in the traditional sense. The ramifications of this are wide-ranging. On a broader level, it highlights the socially constructed nature of race, and illustrates that although society has by and large abandoned older notions of race and people are less likely to support older forms of racism, as a result, race remains a meaningful category that informs the
way that people view and interact with the world around them and the people that live in it. Rather than living in the ‘post-racial’ world that many alluded to after Barack Obama’s election, this thesis indicates that race and racialisation continue to play a large role in Australian society.

The impact of racialisation on the lives of those who have been ‘raced’ is also important to document for legal and policy reasons relating to racial vilification and discrimination laws, particularly in states and territories that don’t have any laws relating to religious vilification, such as NSW, ACT, WA, and SA. In a decision by the Administrative Decisions Tribunal’s Equal Opportunity Division in August this year, Alan Jones and 2GB were held to not have broken any vilification laws because Muslims were held to not be a race. The decision states that: “...vilification of Muslims does not fall within section 20C(1), because Muslims are not a ‘race’ as defined in section 4 of the Act. The reason, as the Tribunal said in Khan [i.e., Khan v Commissioner, Department of Corrective Services & anor [2002] NSWADT 131] at [18], is that Muslims ‘do not share common racial, national or ethnic origins’ and are therefore not an ethno-religious group such as the definition embraces.”

This thesis has posited that while Muslims do not constitute a race in the ‘old’ sense of the term, contemporary public discourses operate on a macro-level to construct them in racialised ways, which then affects the ways that individuals, non-Muslim and Muslim alike, perceive and interact with Muslims on a micro-level. The white converts in this
study all experienced racialisation in varying ways after their conversion. Some of them experienced it in the form of racial vilification. The notion of a white Muslim convert is confusing and confronting for the dominant racial order, because they are perceived to be acting against their racial expectations, which causes some people to vocalise their “preconceived notions of a racialized social structure.” (Omi & Winant 1989: 59). Participant’s experiences thus suggest that Australian laws and policies should broaden their understandings of race to account for new, culturally defined forms of racism.

Exposing the way that Islam is racialised is also significant on a discursive level for Australia as a society, as it forces debates about Islam to occur on ideological terms, rather than through fear-mongering and the marginalisation of communities. It allows Muslims in Australia the opportunity to take part in national discussions as equals rather than the cultural inferiors that racialising discourses currently construct them as. Finally on an individual level, an understanding of the racialisation of their religion can give white converts a framework to understand their often fraught position, suspended between two communities.


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