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‘Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?’: race in the lives of white Muslim converts in Australia

LATE LAST 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*,¹ he is a very visible one. When other people hear of his experiences, their shocked reactions are often accompanied by one of perplexed bemusement: ‘But - you’re as white as they get! Even with all the *sunnah*² gear on, you 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. The assumptions that he deals with on a daily basis are held by both Muslims and non-Muslims who believe Islam to be intricately entwined with cultural identities and histories far removed from their understanding of whiteness and Western cultures.

Far from being unique, Will’s stories reflect the experiences of many white converts to Islam. In this article I argue that the expectations placed upon white Muslim converts exist because Islam is a highly racialised religion in Australia, and the racialisation of Islam on a discursive level in the public sphere is enacted by individuals in their everyday interactions with Muslims. The article explores 12 white converts’ experiences of race post-conversion, drawing on theories of whiteness and racialisation to argue that the act of conversion is one that racialises white Muslims, removing the privilege of racial invisibility that was once afforded them by virtue of their whiteness.

Writings About Converts to Islam

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

'Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?'



Young Anglo-Australian Muslim man in headgear.

Photo by Jakob Hänsel-Harrison, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rankshifted/6646305557/>.

regions as its people came into contact with Muslim empires.³ The second approach attempts to determine the motivation and reasons informing a person's decision to convert. Studies of this nature have spanned a number of countries, including but not limited to Britain.⁴

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. More often than not, the participants in these studies are 'native' converts in Western nations.⁵ 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 work⁶ with Danish converts highlights the tensions between a Danish national identity and Muslim religious identity, and how converts negotiate that conflict. In Danish society, she posits, Muslims are conceptualised as the 'ultimate other',⁷ 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 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’.⁸

Jensen’s research is the most closely aligned to that of this paper, which 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, which can be attributed to the varying and fluid conceptualisations of ‘race’ itself. One understanding of racialisation offered by Omi and Winant sees it as ‘the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group’.⁹ Other descriptions suggest that racialisation most often occurs around perceived social problems, such as immigration and crime, that become associated with certain racial groups.¹⁰ 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’.¹¹

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 be present for racialisation to occur. In contrast, Miles & Brown 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’.¹² This 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’.¹³ Contemporary discourse on race has shifted away from a preoccupation with biological differences to an understanding of race that focuses instead on cultural or religious differences between groups.¹⁴ Anthias and Yuval-Davis 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 refer¹⁵ 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’. This ‘cultural or ‘new’ racism relies on a belief that outsiders are ‘undesirable’; the threat of the other to national cohesion is evoked through the language of ‘cultural difference’ rather than racial inferiority. In their article ‘Contemporary Racism and Islamophobia in Australia’, Dunn and fellow authors¹⁶ argue that anti-Muslim attitudes within Australia are ‘reproduced through racialisation that

includes well-rehearsed stereotypes of Islam' and 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. The authors 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.¹⁷ Importantly, they suggest that the contemporary racialisation of Muslims is primarily derived from 'observable elements of culture'¹⁸ that are either based on clothing or phenotypical attributes such as skin colour, having a beard, or wearing a *kufi*¹⁹ or *hijab*.²⁰

To explore the repercussions of the racialisation of Islam on a micro-level, 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.²¹ The cultural practices associated with whiteness are viewed as normative and 'commonsense', thus 'colonis[ing] the definition of the normal and also the definition of other norms'.²² 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 their pre- and post-conversion experiences.

It is important to note that in the Australian context, whiteness is intricately tied up with the Australian national identity. Moreton-Robinson posits²³ 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'.²⁴ Australia continued to be constructed and enforced as a white man's land through the White Australia Policy,²⁵ which intentionally restricted the immigration of non-white persons up until 1973.

Despite a new multiculturalist outlook after the decline of the White Australia Policy, 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'.²⁶ These days, whiteness is not racially marked but instead operates primarily as the normative understanding of what an Australian is; and so continues to assert dominance in a more subtle but equally exclusive way. Integral to this cultural space are the religious and political ideals of Christianity and secularism. Former Prime Minister John Howard's contribution to the discursive association of whiteness and Christianity throughout his administration has been well documented,²⁷



Indonesian man and Anglo-Australian man talking whilst waiting at the Westall mosque, 2010.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/westallmosque/5084589075/>.

with reference often made to an interview with the *Australian Jewish News* in 2006 in which he stated that Australian culture is ‘plainly’ . . . ‘influenced by the Judaic-Christian ethic’.²⁸

In her article “‘Common Values’: Whiteness, Christianity, Asylum Seekers and the Howard Government’, Randell-Moon convincingly argues²⁹ 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 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’.³⁰ 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.

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, 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 - the post-conversion stories. 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 chose to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews, covering areas such as their upbringing, their contact with Islam and eventual conversion, the responses and attitude of Muslims and non-Muslims following their conversion, whiteness and their cultural identity, and their experiences and understanding of racism and discrimination prior to and following conversion.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted over the course of September 2010. 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. The sample group consisted of five men and seven women, many of whom had experienced being 'visibly'³¹ Muslim at some point in time or all of the time while in public. All of the respondents 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 the participants and later transcribed. I then undertook a three-stage process of coding: firstly, I used open coding to inductively determine codes from the transcripts by analysing them line by line; next, the codes derived from the first stage were axially coded in accordance with my own thoughts on how they should be grouped; and finally, I undertook a process of selective coding in which the axial codes were collected thematically and arranged as a narrative. The subheadings in this article reflect the most common themes that this final stage produced while Figure 1 shows the participants' profiles at the time of the interviews.

We Have This Saying For a Person Converting to Islam . . .

'He became a Turk.'³²

Soon after Philip converted to Islam, his father pulled him aside. 'He said, "You're not white, Philip." The implication was unlike himself, who was white.' 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

Figure 1 – Participants’ profiles.

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

they’re talking about; Muslims’. 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* (2004) argue that the modern Australian folk devil is the ‘Arab/Muslim Other’, as evidenced by the negative representation of Muslims and Arabs by the Australian media. Poynting, Noble, Tabar and Collins 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.’³³

The interviews suggest that in interpersonal interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, the use of racialised comments other than references to Arabs are just as common an 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’. At other times, the classification was more specific, and indicated an understanding of Islam as anything but white. Tara recounts one such experience of this:

I wear *hijab* but I have Anglo features, but I still get not just Islamophobic slurs but clearly racist slurs. I was driving not long ago in the car, and this guy on the street yelled out ‘You effing black slut’. To me! . . . Like dude, obviously I’m white!

The vilification documented above indicate that for some 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. 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 identifies her reaction to the racism that she does encounter and perceive as mediated by her racial identity as a 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!' Tara's realisation of the privilege her whiteness afforded her came after she started wearing a headscarf, and began to notice how she was treated differently. In *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh 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'.³⁴ 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. 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 her privilege.

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. Although she felt that she was treated differently whenever she wore a headscarf, Alinta opined that the type of treatment was often influenced by whether she was wearing an *abaya*³⁵ 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!'

At Worst I'm Seen as a Traitor, at Best I'm Seen as Different. That's the Fix I'm in.³⁶

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. Michelle recalls an altercation with a co-worker at a new job who said that Michelle was a traitor because the second she became Muslim she became an Arab, and was no longer an Australian. 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'. 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 and her father appeared on a documentary broadcast on national television. 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 in her analysis of how white Mormons in America in the 19th and 20th century were castigated as race traitors for participating in polygamous marriages. Denike argues³⁷ 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 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.³⁸ 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 reacted negatively to her decision to convert to Islam. While other family members were also upset, Tara felt that her mother, who she describes as a radical Christian feminist, 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. Michelle notes that the perception of female converts to Islam as being gender traitors as well as race traitors was relatively widespread, and that non-Muslim women often reacted angrily when she told them that she was Muslim: 'People even say to me how could you do that, Islam is so bad to women.'

Tara and Michelle's reflections on women's attitudes towards another woman's conversion to Islam is supported by a 'Racism Survey' conducted by the University of New South Wales and Macquarie University to measure intolerance. 52.8% of respondents 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%.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ Dunn contends⁴¹ that the data 'suggests that the stereotype of Islamic misogyny is an important component of the racialisation of Islam in Australia' as it implies that the respondents who expressed concern were worried about the treatment that a female family member would suffer at the hands of her husband. Ho takes⁴² a similar position to Dunn, and argues that the construction of Islam as a misogynistic 'other' is crucial to contemporary Australian nationalism. Ho criticises⁴³ 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',⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

Rania, George, and Tara all suggest that the conceptualisation of conversion to Islam as an act of race and gender treason is also closely linked to the condescending notion that white people should know better. As Rania states:

It's so easy for them to 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 . . . 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.

George opines that the horror and anger directed towards white people converts to Islam does 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 – that white people 'should know better' featured in many of the participants' narratives.

I'm Sure You're Lebanese, You're So Like Us!⁴⁶

When Michelle describes her experiences as a white convert, she suggests that Muslims are just as likely to view her as Arab or non-white as non-Muslims are. '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."' She shares a number of stories to illustrate her point, including one about the brother of a man she was getting to know for marriage:

His little brother's quite young and he always says to me, 'Oh but you're Lebanese now . . .' He'll make comments about Australians in front of me, he'll say, "Oh those Australians do 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 *kippah*. 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.

Similar experiences were also shared by Shawn and George, illustrating a trend within the Muslim community to automatically associate Muslims with particular ethnocultural backgrounds, in which whiteness cannot play a role. For some Muslims, it can be easier to understand white converts by racialising them, because they themselves see Islam as a racialised religion. Sometimes the act of racialisation is encouraged through following particular customs. In her article 'Praying Where They Don't Belong: Female Muslim converts and access to mosques in Melbourne, Australia', Rachel Woodlock argues 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.⁴⁷

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. He recalls that after converting to Islam, a British Pakistani woman told him that it was no longer inappropriate for him to use the word 'Paki', stating that '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 his 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 marginalised as she was.

Philip too notes that some types of language and forms of behaviour, 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 word⁴⁸ - 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.⁴⁹ 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 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, pointing out that her headscarf is ultimately removable. Even though she has no intention of removing it, she acknowledges that 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.'

You're Always the Convert, You're Never Really the Real Muslim.⁵⁰

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,⁵¹ subhan'Allah,⁵² I wish I could have his *iman!*"⁵³ and then you have the other side: "Bah! He'll be drinking beer next year."' Tara suggests that even amongst Muslims who glorify white converts, there still exists a sense of what she terms 'uneasy ambivalence' towards them, and the admiration can be pulled away at any time:

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 'born' Muslims. Those who had been Muslim for some time 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?"' 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.

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. Jean Jacques Waardenburg 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’.⁵⁴

Current Muslim discourse thus constructs white Westerners as inherently irreligious and immoral. Michelle feels that the main reason people find it hard to accept her as a true Muslim is because they associate her whiteness and ‘Aussie-ness’ with *haram* activities, such as drinking alcohol. She 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 *din* [religion]?’ Philip recounts that ‘I’ve had Muslims tell me that Muslims have been able to Islamise other cultures, but this modern, Western, whiteish culture is something different and it can never be assimilated’. He skeptically adds, ‘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’.

Shawn remarks that he has encountered the same attitude, particularly when looking for a wife:

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, trying to learn.

The experiences of Michelle, Phil, and Shawn highlight that the belief 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 contend⁵⁵ 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.

Implicit within the belief that white converts are pseudo-Muslims is the inverse assumption that certain cultural practices 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 . . . The more cultural I was, 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. 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'.

Similarly, 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 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"'

While Rania and Natalie both readily embrace aspects of Islamised cultures, Philip rejects the idea that white converts should adopt different 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'. 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 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.

Abdul Rahman 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. Abdul Rahman, Philip, and Sean all 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.

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 article seeks to contribute to the conversation that his question inspires. All participants in this research 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, and described the diverse ways in which they respond to it. 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’. 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 negotiates that in her day to day life.

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. Within the broader community, white people’s 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’.⁵⁶

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 argument⁵⁷ 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 some political commentators⁵⁸ alluded to after Barack Obama's election, race and racialisation continue to play a large role in Australian society. 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.



'Muslims for Peace' at anti-war rally protesting Australia's impending involvement in Iraq war, October 2002.

Photo by Rachel Woodlock.