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American Converts to Islam: Identity, Racialization, and Authenticity

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by

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ABSTRACT

Working within a social identity theory model, which posits that identities gain or lose salience depending on the situation and the actors, this study brings into focus the identity management of Americans who have converted to Islam. More specifically, this study of American Muslim converts seeks to understand how the authenticity of their religious identities is challenged and affirmed by others and themselves. Thirty-nine in-depth interviews were examined and interpreted using the insights of narrative analysis and racialization theory. The first finding is that although converts may tell a variety of different stories about how and why they converted to Islam, these stories can be collapsed into three formulaic conversion narratives. Further, each narrative serves the same overall purpose of framing their conversion into a credible story that expresses the legitimacy of their Muslim identity. The second finding is that American converts find their authenticity troubled by the apparent incongruence of their racial and religious identities. These converts occupy racial identities not commonly associated with Islam and Muslims, and therefore find their legitimacy challenged by heritage Muslims who themselves are predominantly Arab and South Asian and come from historically Muslim countries and families. Though not the only relevant components, these racial and cultural factors converge to bestow a kind of authenticity to heritage Muslims that converts cannot achieve, though some are able to make inroads through the adoption of Arab-centric styles of Islamic practice. The third and final finding is that converts who do embrace this "Arab conformity" face consequences among the non-Muslim majority, such as challenges to their racial and cultural status as Americans.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Heightened attention to Muslims in America post-9/11 has resulted in a growing body of research on this population. A substantial portion of this research has inquired into the Muslim American identity, though some avenues remain understudied. In particular, little is known about the lived experience of Muslim converts. This research proposal seeks to investigate two interrelated aspects of Muslim convert identity: how converts situate themselves discursively in relation to other Muslims and other non-Muslims, and how the racial/ethnic identity of converts lend their religious identity greater or lesser authenticity. The first aspect deals with how converts talk about themselves in relation to others, the second with how they feel others view and treat them.

When Muslim converts talk about themselves, when they tell others the story of their conversion, when they explain who they are as Muslims in America, they invariably draw upon cultural resources and frames of reference to communicate effectively with their audience. The current study is concerned with what these resources and references are and where they come from. Do Muslim converts draw upon cultural references that are common to other non-Muslim Americans, do they draw upon those that are common to other Muslims, or some combination of the two? Do converts bridge a cultural gap between Islam and the U.S., or do they simply reside on one side or the other?

Researchers have examined how Muslim converts are received by the non-Muslim majority, yet less is known about how Muslim converts feel they are viewed and treated by other

Muslims. Converts may be regarded as more or less sincere and devout than their non-convert co-religionists, and there are perhaps numerous factors that could contribute to these assessments. Do converts feel that they are regarded as more or less authentically Muslim by other Muslims? And if so, on what grounds do they feel they are being evaluated? Could race/ethnicity be a factor? Could being white make a convert seem more or less authentic to other Muslims? Could being black make one more or less authentic to other Muslims?

To explore these two aspects of Muslim convert identity, i.e., how they talk about themselves, and how they feel others perceive them, I draw upon relevant sociological research on social identity, religious conversion, narrative analysis, and racialization. More specifically, the research questions I am exploring are situated in differing epistemologies within the discipline of sociology. I believe that an exploration of how Muslim converts "talk about themselves" is best undertaken within a constructionist/interpretivist framework, while the question of how they "feel others perceive them" is best explored within a critical framework. By demarcating these as differing epistemologies, my intention is merely to acknowledge that scholars working under each framework have a tendency to make different assumptions about the social world and how best to understand it. The individual data chapters are written as standalone journal articles with specific audiences in mind. Chapter three is intended for a more constructionist audience, while chapters four and five are written with a more critical audience in mind.

That being said, this first chapter is a review of literature intended to set up all three data chapters, and as such I will draw from scholarship situated within both constructionist and critical epistemologies. To facilitate smoother reading of this literature review I begin each section by stating which particular research question the section is intended to address.

Social Identity

Before addressing my research questions, both of which are concerned with identity, it will be useful to establish the types of assumptions about identity that inform my understanding of it. At its most basic level, identity is a distinction between self and others. It requires the preexistence of the notion of the self, and is couched within broader social structures and social locations (Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010). Identity involves both the classification of others into categories, and the recognition of one's own similarity or dissimilarity to social categories of others. Thus, identity is inherently social—individuals know themselves in relation to others (Lawler 2008).

Early theorists such as Cooley and Mead laid the groundwork for later sociological research on identity, positing it as the product of interpersonal interaction. As such, much of the sociological literature on identity emphasizes what Mead (1934) called the "me," that aspect of the self as object, acted upon by outside forces (Cerulo 1997). In spite of this early attention, many within the field have regarded identity as the forte of the psychologist, neglecting its clearly social dimensions. Stephanie Lawler (2008:7) notes this irony when she writes,

> Identities are formed by the social world… and ignoring this relationship results
> in the curious situation of a sociology which represses the social when it comes to
> the business of how identities get produced!

Employing a sociological approach opens the door to seeing identity, its development and deployment, as being situated firmly in the social world. Put broadly, sociological *identity theory* posits that people rely on beliefs and perceptions of themselves to provide a framework for

interacting with the world around them. These beliefs and perceptions about ourselves and our place in the world give life a sense of stability and cohesion.

There are two broad traditions in work on identity: the first, *personal identity theories,* assume a slow development and internalization of identity as the result of continuous social interaction. Individual social actors' ideas about themselves are affirmed, challenged, and otherwise negotiated through socialization, culminating in the generation of a "stable, trans-situational self-concept" (Owens et al. 2010:478).

The second tradition, *situational identity theories*, conceptualize personal identities as much less stable and more conditional. Scholars working in this tradition emphasize "the situation and the culture within which it is embedded" (Owens et al. 2010:478) as having primacy over an internalized sense of self. In this model, individuals' identities fluctuate in relation to the context in which they find themselves. Social actors draw from a repertoire of cultural meanings dictated by the environment and the situation, and adjust their identity in accordance.

Most germane to the current project is *social identity theory* (SIT), which draws attention to category/group memberships and social context. According to Vryan (2007:2216), "social identity defines a person or set of persons in terms of the meanings and expectations associated with a socially constructed group or category of people, and locates a person within socially structured sets of relations." These groups or categories can be the result of any of a number of factors, such as one's gender, age, or race, as well as any other factor thought to be relevant in a particular situation. SIT relies upon the concept of *identity salience*, the "impact of the situation on self-categorizations" (Owens et al. 2010:488). Not only are identities shaped by factors like race, but these factors become more or less salient in relation to both the immediate environment

and in-group versus out-group norms. This is especially significant because these factors (age, race, gender, etc.) signal our belonging or social position within a group or network (Vryan (2007). Consequently, individuals recognize their relationship to other actors and to the situation and elicit appropriate identities while suppressing inappropriate ones.

Research on SIT highlights the impact of situational cues on the meanings of group and interpersonal interactions. In brief, the theory holds that individuals classify themselves and others as being part of the situational in-group or out-group. These classifications can be made on the basis of broad and enduring categories such as race, citizenship, and nationality, or on more contextual categories such as sports team affiliation or clothing. Actors are then thought to organize their attitudes and orient their behaviors in ways that show a preference for the in-group.

The specific utility of social identity theory to this project will be made clearer in later sections of this review, specifically those on narrative identity and racialization. For the purposes of this project, I follow situational identity theories in conceptualizing *identity as a self-concept that is situational and socially constructed*. However, I also acknowledge that personal identities often *feel* stable, internal, and transposable, as personal identity theories would suggest. As such, I take a middle road between these two approaches, positioning my understanding of identity as being situational and contextual, but ultimately internalized.

My interests lie in the religious and racial/ethnic identities of American converts to Islam, and I enquire about the cultural resources and frames of reference that inform these identities. Conversion is an excellent way to study identity formation, as converts engage in a process known as *biographical reconstruction*, in which they reimagine and reinterpret their lives pre and post conversion, drawing a line of distinction between the two (Snow and Machalek 1984).

It is worth noting that the distinction between pre and post conversion selves is evidenced within social scientists' interviews with converts. The interview itself is a particular social interaction in a particular context, and will not manifest the same way in all situations. For example, while explaining their conversion (and themselves) to an interviewer, or better yet, to another Muslim, converts may draw a clear distinction between their old and new identities, yet when speaking with an old friend or family member, these same converts may wish to downplay any changes to their identity.

Conversion

This section speaks to the question of how Muslim converts are perceived by others, Muslim or non-Muslim. In this section I review how sociologists understand conversion, and provide a definition of conversion that emphasizes what I understand as a consequential shift from one social category to another. In doing so I argue that religious conversion has implications for how others perceive the convert, and also consequences for how their acquired religious identity may interact with other social identities they already inhabit, specifically their racial/ethnic identity.

There are a plethora of studies on religious conversion, and numerous definitions of the concept. Some scholars use the term to refer simply to an increase in religiosity, or an acceptance of one's religious heritage after initially rejecting it. Others refer to an embracing of an entirely new faith. Writing in the early 20th century, William James (1929:186) provided an enduring and influential definition of conversion:

The process, gradual or sudden, by which a self—hitherto divided, and

consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right,

superior, and happy because of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

Psychologists find in this definition a crisis of identity, "caused by depression and anxiety"

(Beit-Hallahmi 2014:152), in which the convert is actively seeking to alleviate their mental and

emotional turmoil through dramatic life change. This emphasis on change is the crux of most

definitions of conversion.

Sociologists frequently describe conversion as a "radical change in the perspective of the

recruited individual" (Greil 1977:116), not unlike the adoption of a new scientific paradigm

(Heirich 1977). This idea of conversion as a "comprehensive personal change of worldview and

identity" (Gooren 2007:350) rests "at the core of all conceptions of conversion, whether

theological or social scientific" (Snow and Machalek 1984:169). Whether it occurs "suddenly or

gradually, [conversion] comes with a different view of reality, of the world, and of self" (Jindra

2011:276). That is to say, conversion entails a change to one's "*universe of discourse*, the broad

interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organize experience" (Snow and

Machalek 1983:265).

Thomas DeGloma (2014:2-11) employs a similar understanding, but applies it to the

broader concept of 'awakening'. He defines the phenomenon as:

… a radical transformation of consciousness, a fundamental change in their

perception of   their lives and their orientation to the world around

them…[wherein "awakeners" move from] c*ognitive constraint* (a false or deluded

mental state)… [to] *cognitive emancipation* (a newly enlightened mental state).

Thus, DeGloma encourages observers to "view awakenings [i.e. conversions] as experiences in which individuals actually discover an objectively 'real' yet previously hidden truth or reality" (p. 3). This project takes seriously DeGloma's call to view the convert experience as one of finding truth, and assumes that, having found "the truth," converts are likely to believe they have found their "true self" within it.

Most social scientific definitions envision conversion as a dramatic, once in a lifetime "metamorphic sort of change exemplified by the Apostle Paul's embrace of Christianity" (Snow and Machalek 1984:170), though others find the road to Damascus to be a longer, more circuitous journey. Gooren (2007:349) envisions conversion as a "career," in which people pass "through levels, types and phases" of religiosity and religious participation throughout the course of their lives. Recent work by Galonnier and Rios (2016:67) views conversion as a "learning process." Their ethnographic research at a mosque offering classes for new converts revealed that the "instructors framed conversion as a long term process that requires commitment, dedication, and learning, rather than framing it as a radical life-changing event."

I favor a definition of conversion that foregrounds a change in the characteristics by which social actors are categorized, and am therefore likewise unconcerned with whether this change occurs quickly and dramatically or slowly over time. When I write of conversion, I do not mean a dramatic increase in religiosity, nor a revival within the faith tradition of one's parents. Further, I do not refer to "religious switching," such as moving from Catholic to Baptist. It may be, as psychologists have argued, that in all these variations of conversion "the basic psychological process is identical" (Beit-Hallahmi 2014:154). Yet for the purposes of this study, each of those conceptions of conversion is insufficient. Situated within a social identity framework, the aspect of religious conversion with which I am most concerned is that of a

change in the characteristics by which social actors are assigned to social categories. Therefore, I define *conversion* as a change from one faith tradition to another, in so much as the two faiths are generally recognized as constituting distinct social categories. Defining conversion in this way focuses attention on the social dimensions of converting by conceptualizing it not simply as a change in personal beliefs, but a change in social category membership. Doing so facilitates my endeavor to examine the questions of how converts talk about themselves and how they feel others perceive them.

Biographical Reconstruction

Having defined conversion above, this section turns attention to a well-established phenomenon of interdisciplinary scholarship on conversion: *biographical reconstruction*, or the reimagining of one's life story after having undergone a meaningful change. Specifically, this section is useful for setting up my approach to answering the question of how Muslim converts talk about themselves.

Thomas DeGloma (2010; 2014) uses the term *awakening* to refer to a dramatic cognitive shift from metaphorical darkness to light, in which the awakened come to regard past beliefs as mistaken and current beliefs as enlightened. DeGloma (2014:20) explains:

> [1] the awakener takes a contentious dialogical orientation toward the proponents
> of a rejected worldview, [2] they take a harmonious dialogical orientation toward
> the proponents of a newly embraced worldview, [3] they take a proselytizing
> dialogical orientation toward individuals in the world at large, [4] they take a
> critical-deprecating dialogical orientation toward their past self.

This model shares much in common with many theories of religious conversion. In particular, stage four of the process, wherein awakeners adopt a critical attitude toward their previous self, lifestyle, or state of mind. Snow and Machalek (1984:173-4) reviewed sociological work on religious conversion, allowing them to develop four 'empirical indicators' that are more or less present in nearly all cases.

> [1] *biographical reconstruction*… one's life is reconstructed in accordance with a new discourse …[2] the adoption of a *master attribution scheme* which informs all causal attributions about self, others, and events in the world… [3] the suspension of *analogical reasoning…* analogic metaphors are resisted because they violate the convert's belief that his or her world view is incomparable to other competing perspectives… [4] and *embracement of the convert role*… the new identity is relevant and central to the individual in all situations.

Of these indicators of conversion, biographical reconstruction is the most prevalent as it transcends disciplinary boundaries (Staples and Mauss 1987; Stromberg 1993) and is "the essence of individual conversion" (Beit-Hallahmi 2014:156). Biographical reconstruction is central to the current project and requires further unpacking.

Biographical reconstruction is a prime indicator of conversion, and it entails the re-imagining of one's life story in accordance with a new worldview and discourse (Snow and Machalek 1984). Biographical reconstruction can be observed in conversion narratives and has several core features. First, these narratives follow group-specific guidelines for interpreting certain experiences, which suggests that converts will talk about themselves in ways that are influenced by the worldview or perspective of their adopted faith or religious community. Secondly, conversion narratives do not remain fixed, but rather are reconstructed continuously in

light of new experience. The fluidity of these narratives suggests that they may have multiple sources of inspiration. Lastly, these narratives tell us more about the convert's current experience and orientation than about his or her past (Snow and Machalek 1984). These features of biographical reconstruction have made conversion narratives largely unhelpful to researchers attempting to understand the causes of conversion. However, researchers focused on the meaning of conversion for convert identity may find biographical reconstruction to be a fruitful avenue for examining this identity work.

Narrative Analysis

Having established that biographical reconstruction is a common feature of the stories converts tell about themselves, this section reviews literature on narrative analysis. Narratives are understood to be instrumental in making sense of our lived experiences, and are especially useful to social actors who wish to account for significant or defining moments in their lives (Webster and Mertova 2007).

A narrative is a story "which represents cause and effect relations through its sequencing of events rather than by appeal to standards of logic and proof" (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes 2011:111). Simply put, narratives are stories with a point or a moral (Ewick and Silbey 1995). The point or moral of any particular narrative is not always clear, and may be subject to widely varying interpretations, but the components of narratives remain the same (Lawler 2008; Polletta et al. 2011). Narratives have *characters*, either specific individuals or generalized types of people, with whom the audience is meant to empathize; *action*, the actual events taking place over time, often in the form of a struggle or challenge; and a *plot*, the overarching structure,

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which "conveys order, sequence, and meaning" to the story (Kirkman 2002:33). Narratives also take place in a scene, which is crucial for providing interpretive context.

Narratives make causal statements, and they do so for specific audiences. They explain when, how, and why something happened, using the cultural logic appropriate to the immediate audience. "Humans shape and comprehend their lives by telling stories," notes Rambo (1999:265), and the stories they tell are "authored for different purposes, do different kinds of work, and are evaluated by different criteria" (Loseke 2007:680). This is why narratives are so important, because of the work they do in making our lives, and the world in which we live, meaningful to us (Bruner 1990).

One important example of this work is identity formation. Taylor (1989:17) identifies the individual's "search for meaning" as a key problem in modern life. In order for people to create meaning in their lives, he writes, we must first have a working conception of what a life well-lived looks like, so that we may "grasp our lives in a narrative" (Taylor 1989:47). In doing so, people enter a "process of engagement with a polyphonic web of discourse" (Hammack and Cohler 2011:179) in which identities are produced through "assembling various memories, experiences, episodes, etc.…which we interpret and reinterpret… within narratives" (Lawler 2008:11-2). Lawler further explains,

> The self is understood as unfolding through episodes which both express and constitute that self. The very constitution of an identity is configured over time and through narrative. Identity is not something foundational and essential, but something produced through the narratives people use to explain and understand their lives (Lawler 2008:17).

Thus, research on narrative and identity takes a more cultural approach to identity formation than social identity theory. However, the cultural meanings that make up this "polyphonic web of discourse" are embedded in social categories, manifested in group dynamics, and enacted in group interactions. "Narrative cannot be understood apart from history and culture," writes Loseke, "because the multiple contexts of storytelling define what is, and what is not, evaluated as an acceptable or a good story" (2007:673). In other words, the self-categorizations and classifications that enable social actors to make in-group versus out-group distinctions are informed by larger systems of categorization and classification at the cultural level. These cultural meanings that are intertwined within narratives provide the framework of meanings that social actors draw upon from one situation to the next.

Formula Stories and Cultural Codes

Not only do we use narratives to organize, interpret, and relate the events of our lives to each other, but we also organize these stories by using plots and characters with which our audience is already familiar. Narratives are powerful when their characters are recognizable and their plots are predictable. Such narratives, referred to as *formula stories* for their common structure, employ what are known as cultural and emotion codes (Loseke 2012). Donileen Loseke defines *cultural codes* are "densely packed, complex, and interlocking visions of how the world works, and how the world should work" (2007:665), and *emotion codes* as "systems of ideas about when and where and toward whom or what emotions should be inwardly experienced, outwardly displayed, and morally evaluated" (2012:253).

To better understand the ubiquity of formula stories, consider the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell. Campbell's (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* catalogs a formula story

about a hero who embarks on a quest or adventure, the completion of which results in their acquiring a newfound self-knowledge. Campbell demonstrated that this twelve-step story, which he calls the "monomyth," is nearly identical in the mythologies of cultures both ancient and modern, and has been appropriated extensively by Hollywood. Thus, the plot and characters of many major film franchises, such as *Star Wars*, are in fact interchangeable with classic tales of heroism in nearly every society. The heroes and villains of these tales are based on universal cultural and emotion codes, which Loseke refers to as "the basic building blocks of cultural meaning systems" (2012:262), and are therefore already known to the audience, allowing them to connect to the story in meaningful ways.

The narratives of conversion recounted by converts to Islam are likely formulaic themselves, and no doubt rely upon commonly shared sets of ideas or systems of meaning, and the feelings that accompany them (i.e., cultural and emotion codes), to make these stories intelligible and believable to an audience. Indeed, "religious convert" is itself a cultural code, coming prepackaged with meanings that guide the audience's interpretation and evaluation of the convert and their story. I will return to the concept of cultural codes, and provide more specific examples of how I am using the term, after a consideration of conversion narratives as a particular type of formula story.

Conversion Narratives

In this section I briefly consider how previous scholarship on religious conversion has made use of conversion narratives, yet also found these narratives to be confounded by biographical reconstruction. I argue that when using a narrative analytic approach, the fact of

biographical reconstruction can become an object of study rather than a hindrance. I then provide an example of scholarship taking this approach.

Conversion can be described as a "rupture with a former identity" (Travisano 1970:598 [cited in Gooren 2007:348]). Narrative is a way of producing and negotiating identity (Lawler 2008). Narratives of conversion therefore present an exciting window into the re-articulation of personal and social identity work within which converts must engage. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (2014:155) writes:

> Conversion testimonials tell us of a miraculous transformation, from darkness to a great light, from being lost to being found. There is a sharp contrast between earlier suffering and current exhilaration. The conversion narrative always includes a wide gap between the past and the present, between corruption and redemption, and through this gap the power of transformation through enlightenment is decisively proven.

Beit-Hallahmi's summation of conversion narratives brings our discussion back to biographical reconstruction (Snow and Machalek 1984), in which converts strongly distinguish between their pre and post conversion selves. Snow and Machalek (1984:175) note that these reconstructions have been derided as little more than retrospective fabrications, and provide several reasons as to why a reliance upon "convert's recounted experience" leads to "causal explanations [that are] both empirically and theoretically misguided." They argue that biographical reconstructions are:

> Socially constructed… in accordance with group-specific guidelines for interpreting certain experiences…do not remain fixed… [but rather] are reconstructed over time… [and] are redefined continuously in the light of new experience. [They conclude] …data derived from converts about their cognitive

orientation and life situation prior to conversion should be treated as information

that tells us more about the convert's current experience and orientation than

about his or her past (p. 175-7).

Thus, the biographically reconstructed character of converts' accounts is informed by the group

norms and values of their adopted religious community. That is to say, the cultural codes and

larger worldview predominant in their new faith and community is articulated in their accounts.

Further, this problematizes the use of their conversion stories for determining why they

converted in the first place.

An excellent example of the confounding effect of biographical reconstruction can be

found in Beit-Hallahmi's (2014) review of psychological research on conversion. He observes

that "2/3 of converts and only 1/5 of non-converts reported personal problems... converts

reported an unhappy childhood... and depressive tendencies in the past combined with positive

feelings about the present" (Beit-Hallahmi 2014:163). It should be noted that all of these findings

were recorded *after* conversion took place, and therefore it is unknown if these respondents

would have reported the same problems, unhappy childhoods, and depressive tendencies before

having converted.

Kose (1996) found that the *majority* of his Muslim converts reported father absence and

an unhappy childhood. This finding echoes the general psychological assertion that "frustration,

crisis, and conflict," and a desire to resolve these tensions by seeking out a new worldview,

precede conversion, yet it is impossible to determine if these factors were actually present pre-

conversion, and somehow causal, or rather part of the biographical reconstruction that most

scholars, from psychology to sociology, agree is a perennial characteristic of converts post-

conversion. Indeed, Stark and Finke (2000) have argued that the very notion that converts were

looking for a new worldview or religion is itself an act of biographical reconstruction. Were they truly religious seekers before conversion, or did they stumble upon a new faith, embrace it, and then come to believe that it was what they were looking for all along?

It is worth pointing out that biographical reconstruction is not particular to converts. Indeed, the "sense of stability and consistency experienced over the course of life results *primarily* from continuing reconstructive activity" (Kirkman 2002:32, emphasis mine). Everyone engages in biographical reconstruction, convert or not. We continuously make sense of our lives in light of new experiences. In fact, if one is less concerned with the *causes* of conversion, than the *meaning* of conversion for the individual's identity, biographical reconstruction becomes a most welcome avenue of analytic inquiry.

Thus, biographical reconstruction is central to my project. Previous research has tended to disregard these reconstructions as biased and untrue, but for me they are a crucial point of interest. Converts may not be fully honest with their audience, or themselves, when relating the tale of their life before and after conversion, and they almost certainly are drawing from a set of cultural codes (consciously or unconsciously) to piece together a story that their audience will believe and react to favorably. Because of this, rather than in spite of it, I pursue narratives of conversion as vehicle for understanding convert identity formation. We are the stories we tell, about ourselves and to ourselves, therefore narratives of conversion matter in the most intimate way to converts' identities.

An excellent starting point for examining biographical reconstruction in conversion narratives can be found in the work of Thomas DeGloma (2014:11-2), whose work on awakening narratives details a broad and generic formula story that, "with slight changes… can be used to undermine and reject any one system of meaning and pave the way to justify and

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defend any newly acquired worldview." DeGloma (2014:13-4) outlines the plot of the awakening formula story thusly:

> [1] storytellers account for a past state of 'darkness', [2] describe their experience of discovery and personal transformation, [and 3] account for a current state of 'light' and commonly describe having found their true place in the world.

These elements of the plot hold true regardless of the specifics of each case. It matters little whether they are embracing a new religion or worldview, or rejecting an old one. An individual leaving Christianity for Islam tells a story remarkably similar to one leaving Islam for Christianity. Likewise, individuals leaving liberalism for conservatism, or vice versa, do the same. In each case, the awakener realizes or discovers the 'falseness' of their original beliefs and the 'truth' of their new worldview (DeGloma 2014). Formula stories like the one outlined by DeGloma are a valuable resource for inquiring into the identity work of narratives. Allowances should also be made for stories that do not fit this model. Erin Johnston's (2013) work on converts to neo-Paganism found a common theme of continuity rather than the 'radical change' of most conversion research. Her respondents did not feel that they had embraced a new belief system or worldview, but rather had found a name for what they claimed to have always believed.

Regardless of the change they are making, or insist they are not making, religious converts employ cultural and emotion codes when recounting their narratives of conversion. Likewise, Muslim converts draw from cultural codes when talking about themselves. They may use codes common to American society, or they may use codes particular to their Muslim community, or some combination of the two. The stories people tell about themselves are contingent upon the contexts in which they are living and the cultural codes available (Loseke

2007). It is within these contexts and cultural codes that interpretive meanings are drawn. "In telling a life," writes Lawler, "people are simultaneously interpreting that life" (2008:14).

Hence, cultural codes are intrinsic to narratives, and narratives are common in all aspects of social life (Loseke 2007). In order to better explain my use of the term cultural codes and their relation to this project, the following section will discuss two ways of thinking about the cultural codes of race and religion: racial projects and charter religions.

Racial Projects

Whereas much of what was been discussed so far concerning narrative analysis, narratives of conversion, and biographical reconstruction has been in the service of addressing the question of how converts talk about themselves, this section refocuses attention on the question of how converts feel they are perceived by others. Additionally, this section connects to the previous one by providing a fuller picture of cultural codes. Here, I understand cultural codes to be a kind of building block that provides a heuristic which shapes and facilitates socially normative understandings of the world around us. More specifically, this section examines cultural codes of race and religion, especially as they relate to Muslims, and explores how these codes inform our perceptions and evaluations of Muslims and Islam.

As will become clear throughout this section and the one following, I take race and religion as mutually informative and intricately linked. As I will argue, "Muslim" is a religious category that, at least within the U.S., is often understood as being a racial or ethnic category. To avoid confusion, I will use the term Muslim (no quotations) when referring to a voluntary member of the religion of Islam, and the term "Muslim" (in quotations) when referring to what may be understood as a symbolic type of person. Muslims, therefore, are members of a religious

category or group, to which the converts interviewed for this study have freely and willfully identified themselves. Conversely, "Muslim" is a racialized cultural code that, in American society—particularly following September 11, 2001 and the subsequent fallout—is deeply imbued with negative connotations that facilitate prejudicial evaluations from others.

Omi and Winant (2015) consider race a dynamic concept that is produced through a process known as racial formation. At its core, *racial formation* is a process of othering on the basis of phenotypic differences, usually skin color. This othering results in the classification of individuals into groups or categories with the assumption of likeness. The phenotypic differences are themselves arbitrary, but the categories are especially meaningful, as they are employed to justify systems of exploitation and privilege. The move from arbitrary differences to subordination or superiority is the result of *racial projects*, which are themselves representations and explanations which form cultural ideas about racial categories. Racial projects can be thought of as popular beliefs about the presumed inferiority of people that inhabit a particular racial category, and the social structural elements that produce racial inequalities. The beliefs themselves are socially constructed, as evidenced by the fact that they change through time and space. However, they are not generally perceived as malleable and transient, but rather fixed and natural. That is to say, they are essentialized. Social actors draw from these beliefs and ideas, employ them, reify them, and challenge them. Of particular importance to the ensuing discussion is this application of racial projects and their essentialized representations.

As socially constructed cultural ideas about racial categories, racial projects can be thought of as cultural codes of race. The beliefs, ideas, assumptions, and evaluations that make up racial projects inform a process referred to as "racialization." Omi and Winant (2015:111) define *racialization* as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified

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relationship, social practice, or group." An example of the way in which these "racial meaning[s]" can be extended to a group is through physical, usually phenotypic characteristics, such as skin tone, eye shape, or hair. Thus, someone holding the physical characteristics understood to be typical of "black" would then have those racial meanings (i.e., cultural codes corresponding with "black person") written onto their person.

However, not every scholar has used racialization in this manner. Hochman (2018) distinguishes between "thick" and "thin" definitions of racialization. He argues that "thin" definitions use racialization as a "shallow descriptor," while "thick" definitions are those which tell us something deeper about "how racialized groups are being understood" (Hochman 2018:3). For example, in a thin sense, racialization cannot be applied to Muslims because they are a religious group, not a racial group. Yet by using racialization in a thick sense, scholars are able to recognize that the term "Muslim" has taken on meanings that go beyond religion, such as strong associations to the racial and ethnic groups that comprise the Middle East (Hochman 2018).

I take Omi and Winant's (2015) definition of racialization to be appropriately "thick" in that it refers to a process by which people are identified as members of a supposed racial group by the presence of certain physical characteristics. The group in question, Muslims, are not a racial group, *but are effectively understood as one*. This still leaves the issue of how people can be identified as members of a "racialized group" which is itself comprised of people whose phenotypical characteristics reflect the variety of human expression. To answer this I turn to the concept of "ethnoracialization."

Ethnoracialization is an extension of racialization theory, in which racialized meanings are attached to cultural artifacts (clothing) and also to accent, name, or country of origin (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004). These phenotypic and cultural markers of race/ethnicity are imbued with

meanings, and these meanings are informed by cultural codes of race. Markers of a religious

identity may operate in the same way, connecting religious minorities to positions on a racial

hierarchy through distinguishing features of their appearance. Although my use of racialization

in this study is specifically informed by ethnoracialization, I follow previous scholarship in

simply referring to it by the broader term "racialization" (see Galonier 2015); Moosavi 2015a;

2015b; Hussain 2017b; Selod 2015; Zopf 2018).

James Thomas (2010) outlines the racialization of Jews in medieval Europe as a process

by which new meanings were attached to distinguishing features of Jewish identity. Thomas

argues that these racialized meanings were,

> formulated over time through a rearticulation of Church doctrine which first
>
> positioned the inferiority of the Jew within their religious practices, to one which
>
> located their inferiority as inherently part of their soul and manifest upon their
>
> bodies, from fixable through conversion to incurable and diseased (p.1737).

The above quote by Thomas (2010) provides an example of a minority group being transformed

from a religious to a racial category. Though dated, this is exemplary of the socio-historical

process of racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015). The boundaries and markers of Jewish racial

identity in medieval times, and the meanings associated with them, shifted dramatically. Moving

from an emphasis on Jewish religious practices to their spiritual and biological makeup, this shift

in discourse mirrors contemporary debates of culture versus biology.

Saher Selod (2015) argues that in the case of Muslims in the U.S., the hijab (headscarf),

beard, and Muslim sounding name take the place of skin color and act as markers of Muslim

status or identity. These markers are, in turn, the basis for everyday acts of racialization and

discrimination against Muslims. The consequences of this racialization for Muslim Americans

are "de-Americanization, cultural exclusion and a denial of a national identity" (p.78). Selod continues:

> Islamic symbols [hijab, Muslim name] have become so loaded with negative cultural connotations, such as foreigner, enemy of the state, misogynist, submissive, and anti-American, Muslim Americans experience exclusion from the basic privileges citizenship should entail (p.88)…for Muslim Americans in the context of a post-9/11 society, racialization occurs when new racial meanings are applied to their bodies and as a result they are denied membership in society… Muslim is becoming a de-facto racial classification… newer theories of race are required to explain how a religious identity can provoke racial experiences (p. 92).

As Selod explains, negative connotations are attached to markers of Muslim status. When individuals carry those markers, the meanings are inscribed on the individuals themselves. This is racialization, not by skin color or hair, but by other identifying religious markers. And as such, it opens the door to prejudice and discrimination.

Debates on the hijab routinely center on two competing ideas: it is a symbol of liberation from the male gaze, or a symbol of patriarchal oppression (Franks 2000). Alia Al-Saji (2010) takes the discourse of the veil into the realm of race theory. Muslim women who wear the hijab are often subjected to gendered racialization because they are regarded as oppressed. This perception of victimhood is embedded in the religious/racial signifier of the hijab, and written onto the bodies of women wearing the hijab. Muslim women who do not wear the hijab do not receive the same label. Thus, the hijab *racializes* the wearer. The actual religious, racial, or ethnic status of the individual woman is of less importance than the presence of the racialized

religious marker (i.e., the hijab). For example, a non-Muslim woman who dons a hijab, regardless of her racial or ethnic background, may be subjected to gendered racialization and deemed to be an "oppressed woman." Likewise, a Muslim woman of any racial or ethnic background who does not don a hijab will not be subjected to the same ethnoracialization. She may still find herself racialized on the basis of some other physical characteristic, but if she is not wearing a hijab, and therefore not readily identified as a "Muslim," her racialization may not be into the cultural code of "Muslim." In everyday social life, these "axioms" become a bit muddled by intervening factors, yet the overall (il)logic remains intact.

Thus far, my discussion of racial projects has largely ignored their structural aspects. Though I am primarily concerned with racial projects as a form of narrative cultural code, I recognize that they also form social structure just as they are informed by it. The work of Michelle Byng (2012) is instructional here. She writes,

> Muslim and Arab identities of the [9/11] hijackers became equivalent to
> 'terrorist', and this is reinforced by every other act of terrorism committed by
> someone who is Muslim and/or Arab... Clearly the legislative response, especially
> in terms of visa policies, has created the legal, categorical, and racialized identity
> of Muslim (p. 711).

In Byng's assessment, the racialization of Muslims is a process by which cultural understandings (i.e., cultural codes) inform official government policy and vice versa. Though this more structural dimension of racialization is important for understanding the wider extent to which it can shape the lives and experiences of a racialized group within a racially hierarchical society, the current study is more concerned with the cultural contours of racialization.

Before moving on to an examination of the cultural codes of religion, I wish to further explain my view of the advantage of using the concept of racialization rather than, say, the more general concept of "othering." Firstly, racialization theory provides the language needed to better articulate the experiences of Muslims who "look like Muslims," while also acknowledging that their experiences may be (and in fact are) different than those Muslims who do not "look Muslim." Further, using the racialization framework allows the experiences of Muslims, an oft denigrated religious minority, to be transvalued into those of similarly oppressed racial minorities, and opens the door to the analytical tools of contemporary race theory.

This brings us to a second meaning of the term "racialized" that I will be using in this study. Whereas individual Muslims wearing Islamic symbols are racialized by those symbols and the deeply negative meanings they can convey, I also use "racialized" to refer to the religion of Islam being closely associated with racial and ethnic groups predominately found in the Middle East (Bayoumi 2006; Gotanda 2011; Joshi 2006). The effect being that whereas words like Hinduism or Zen Buddhism connote an intrinsic association with India/Indian or Japan/Japanese respectively, Islam is linked to Arabness/Middle Easternness in ways that go beyond the origins of the faith and extend to assumptions about the kind of people and culture thought to be quintessential to the faith. In order to explain more fully how I understand Islam to be racialized, I begin with a review of the concept of charter religions.

Charter Religions

Just as racial projects provide a useful way of thinking about cultural codes of race, the concept of charter religions may help illustrate the cultural codes imbued within widely held understandings of religions. Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind (2009) write that Protestants,

Catholics, and Jews in the U.S. belong to what may be called *charter religions*, the religions most commonly associated with the people and culture of a country. Other faiths, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, despite rapidly growth in the U.S., are not charter religions and are not widely associated with mainstream America. Broadly speaking, belonging to a charter religion is thought to have positive consequences for one's social status. Belonging to a non-charter religion may have the opposite effect. Further, charter religions enjoy legal recognition; their major holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, are nationally recognized federal holidays. The legal recognition of charter religions solidifies and reifies their cultural status within American society.

In some cases, immigrants to the U.S. belonging to charter religions may find themselves in a better position vis-à-vis their non-chartered countrymen. Christian and Buddhist immigrants from China are one example (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Further, immigrants belonging to non-charter religions can raise their social status by converting to a charter religion. Conversely, U.S. citizens can experience a lowering of status by converting to a non-charter religion (Alba et al. 2009). This may be especially true of converts to Islam. Besides its non-charter status, and therefore symbolic exclusion from American society, Islam is often associated with violence, terrorism, and barbarity (Cainkar 2011; Jackson 2010; Nagra 2010; Said 1981), and therefore held in especially low regard and as un-American.

The preceding discussion of racial and religious cultural codes, specifically as they pertain to Muslims, indicates their incongruity with the cultural code of "American" more generally. This incongruity is complemented by an overlapping of racial and religious cultural codes, well exemplified in a study by Ajrouch and Jamal (2007:861), who observed that "religious affiliation… may heavily influence racial identity placements and announcements."

Their study of immigrant Arab Americans found that those of Christian faith were significantly more likely to identify themselves as "white" when compared to Muslim immigrants from the same countries. They write, "Muslims, when compared to Christians, are less likely to see themselves as part of a mainstream "white" category of identity" (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007:870).

This can be explained through a consideration of the cultural codes discussed above. Both the racialization of Muslim identity as non-white and non-American, and the status of Islam as a non-charter religion and likewise non-American may contribute. Arab Muslim immigrants to the U.S. are aware that they are not regarded as white by mainstream American standards and are therefore less likely to identify themselves as white. However, Arab Christian immigrants to the U.S. are more likely to identify as white, perhaps realizing that their religion presents them not with a disadvantage, but rather a privilege.

Black, White, Muslim

Having established the racialization of Islam—the deep association between Islam the religion and the people and culture of the Middle East to the extent that Islam is regarded as a religion specifically for Arab/Middle Eastern peoples—I turn now to a consideration of the consequences of this association for U.S. born converts to Islam. More specifically, this section outlines some of the racial dynamics of the communities into which converts integrate after converting, which will be useful for understanding their later experiences within these communities.

The racial/ethnic identity Muslim converts inhabit at the time of conversion can lead to different outcomes regarding their reception and incorporation into their local Muslim communities. This is because U.S. religious congregations, even multiracial and multicultural

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ones, have a tendency to replicate the larger U.S. racial hierarchy (Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013). This racial hierarchy devalues and denigrates black and brown bodies (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2006), which suggests that black and African American converts will face much cooler receptions at immigrant mosques than do whites. In addition, many black men are exposed and convert to Islam while in prison. The stigma of being an ex-con may well play a part in making black Americans less desirable as new additions to the community. Regardless of whether a black convert has been to prison or not, the connection of black bodies to crime and incarceration is present in American society.

The acrimony runs both ways, as black Muslims decry the 'false universalism' of immigrant Muslims. black Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson argues that although immigrant Muslim American communities may preach a colorblind Islam, they have by and large not been cognizant of or concerned with the difficulties faced by black Americans, or supportive of their struggle (Jackson 2005). Conversely, Islam enjoyed a long-standing presence in the U.S. before the 1965 changes to immigration law which allowed for an influx of Muslim immigrants. There are numerous African-American mosques that may cater to black converts, meaning they may not have to frequent predominantly immigrant mosques and therefore not often interact with immigrant Muslims.

The situation is decidedly different for white converts, who sit at the top of the U.S. racial hierarchy at the time of their conversion. Whites are often regarded as more representative of American society as a whole, which may encourage others to view their conversion as more indicative of a reconciliation or harmonizing of Islamic and American values. Also, Islam has been much more readily accepted by black America than white America. Both historically and

today, most converts are black, whereas white conversion is a more recent and less common phenomenon. Thus, the conversion of whites to Islam may seem that much more novel.

A recent study by Galonnier and Rios (2016) provides a powerful example of how this plays out in the lives of white Muslim converts, whose religious identity and racial/ethnic identity are sometimes regarded as incompatible:

> … as converts, it was sometimes difficult to feel like they fully belonged. This was particularly true for Muslim converts who acknowledged not feeling at ease in the Muslim community. During discussion groups and interviews, they expressed frustration and disillusions concerning their interactions with other Muslims. They sometimes felt treated like small children or despised as inauthentic and un-genuine. More importantly, because Islam as a religion has been racialized, those who did not fit the stereotypical expectations of what "a Muslim looks like" felt they needed to go the extra mile to signal their belonging and demonstrate the authenticity of their conversion. The white American converts, in particular, did not fit into most people's mental frames (both Muslim and non-Muslim) who instead considered Islam to be a nonwhite religion… this incredulity and, at times, suspicion jeopardized their attempts at becoming full-fledged members of the community (p. 70-71).

From this quote, it is clear that there is more contributing to this problem than just racial/ethnic identity. The concerns felt by converts may also derive from being a newcomer, or perceived newcomer to the faith. Or perhaps because they were not born into the faith, or because it is not the faith of their family or their ancestors. All of these and more may have a role to play, yet there is something undeniably compelling about the apparent incongruity of Muslim converts

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racial/ethnic and religious identities. These converts are keenly aware that they do not "look the part," and this factors in to the evaluations they receive from others, and perhaps also from themselves.

In summary, Muslim converts' racial identities (both black and white) are incongruent with their religious identity (thought to be Arab) (Galonnier 2015). Different meanings (cultural codes/racial projects) are invoked by black and white bodies, which may make them seem more or less congruent with the racial and religious cultural codes of Muslim. This (in)congruence can be thought of as making them more or less credible or authentic. In the next section, I address the linkages between authenticity and racial/ethnic identity before exploring the problem of authenticity for Muslim converts, the strategies they employ to obtain it, and the consequences they may face for doing so.

Authenticity

This section defines the concept of authenticity as a social phenomenon and highlights the connection between social authenticity and race. Doing so provides additional context to the aspects of racial identity that I will explore when inquiring as to how converts feel they are perceived by others. I argue that challenges to authenticity are sometimes expressed through the language of race or within a racial context, and believe that understanding this is important for contextualizing the experiences of converts to Islam whose racial identity is an exception to the norm of most Muslim communities.

Authenticity is often thought of as being true to oneself, an individual accomplishment of self-discovery. Philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) regards an *authentic person* as one whose self-concept is not informed by others or in relation to others but rather from within. Yet our self-

concepts are in fact deeply informed by the social (Cooley 1922; Mead 1934). Thus, where

Taylor relies on a realist understanding of authenticity, sociologists interested in understanding

how authenticity is socially and culturally mediated may favor a more constructionist approach.

Williams and Vannini (2016:3) define *authenticity* as "a set of qualities that people in a

particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar." As an evaluative

concept, authenticity lends itself to challenges, and challenges to social actors' authenticity are

commonplace. Many of these challenges are explicit attacks on the authenticity of racial/ethnic

identities. A notable example in recent history is conservative radio personality Rush

Limbaugh's use of the label "Halfrican-American" in regards to president Obama (Serwer 2007).

On one level, this label plays to thoroughly debunked suspicions that Obama may have been

born outside the U.S., and therefore disqualified for the presidency. However, on another thinly

veiled level, this is a clear attempt to challenge Obama's Americanness, his authenticity as an

American, not just in terms of nationality, but also his cultural legitimacy as an American. This

challenge is issued by foregrounding the President's racial/ethnic identity as being markedly

different from Americans in general, and from other African Americans in particular. In using

the label "Halfrican-American," Limbaugh is challenging Obama's authenticity as an American

(national and cultural), but also his authenticity as an African-American (racial/ethnic).

A more recent example that has garnered repeated media attention is Donald Trump's

mocking use of the name Pocahontas in reference to Senator Elizabeth Warren. Warren, a white

woman, has claimed partial Native American heritage (Lee 2016). Whether Trump finds this

claim truly incredulous is beside the point, as he has used it repeatedly and effectively to

demean, mock, and challenge Warren's credibility as someone who is supposedly not what she

claims to be. On one level this may be regarded as an extension of Trump's positioning of

himself as a Maverick or political outsider and Warren as an establishment politician. Politicians are often not what they claim to be, and Trump's audience is tired of the status quo. However, by mocking Warren's claim to Native American ancestry by pointing to her whiteness, Trump is explicitly drawing attention to the supposed incongruity of her racial/ethnic and cultural identities.

What we witness then are attempts to lower someone's status by challenging their claim to a racial identity. Obama is "not really black" in Limbaugh's estimation because he has a white mother, and Warren is "not really Native American" in Trump's opinion because she is white. Both problematize the authenticity of the target by appealing to a lack of racial bona fides. This is of course reminiscent of the stratified racial hierarchy that social actors are placed upon through the process of racialization, and these examples highlight the prominent role of race/ethnicity in affirming or negating a social actor's authenticity. Such challenges to authenticity of identity on the basis of race/ethnicity do not only take place on the public stage, but within the lives of every-day people.

Conversely, someone's racial or ethnic identity may also protect them from challenges to their authenticity. As members of a racialized religion, Muslims of Middle Eastern descent, especially Arabs, are regarded as more authentically Muslim in the U.S. context than those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their intimacy with the Arabic language, in which the Qur'an and other major Islamic texts are written, may likewise be thought to lend them what might be called "ethnoreligious capital." Arab Muslims have then an "air of authenticity" that stands in stark contrast to Western born converts. Galonnier and Rios (2016:76) comment on the stress this places on new Muslim converts:

The path toward acceptance in the new religious community was particularly

lengthy and tortuous for converts to Islam. Because Islam as a religion has been

racialized, the alleged mismatch between converts' outward appearance and their

inward spiritual choice was an additional obstacle in their quest for recognition

and legitimacy. White converts, in particular, stuck out as perpetual outsiders in

predominantly Arab or South Asian communities, while African American

converts had to deal with ostracism and exclusion.

How then can Muslim converts come to possesses Muslimness? Recent scholarship has

investigated this question. Galonnier and Rios (2016:61) ask "What type of knowledge must

[new converts] acquire to claim spiritual authenticity in their respective religious communities?"

They find that some mosques provide classes for new converts in which they are taught how to

behave like Muslims and deal with community expectations for them. What then does it mean to

"behave like Muslims"? Rao (2015) conducted an ethnographic study of such classes, finding

that converts become authentic Muslims by learning to be good Muslim men and women. She

(2015:413-15) writes, "the normalization of particular religious observances makes different

demands on men and women and in so doing produces gendered religious subjects," concluding,

"doing religion, cultivating a legitimate religious self in contrast to a secular other, is a highly

gendered process." This involves adopting certain attitudes and behaviors thought to be

appropriate for men or women, but it also involves adopting the right kind of dress.

Leon Moosavi's (2012) work has explored this component of authenticity in the lives of

Muslim converts. In an article about the "authentic Muslim," Moosavi (2012:104) writes:

I use the concept of the authentic Muslim to refer to the Muslim who is

considered by others as genuine, sincere and legitimate in claiming to be a

Muslim. The same idea was sometimes described as the 'real Muslim' or 'proper

Muslim' in the interviews as it is in everyday discourse of Muslims in Britain. I

also use the term 'Muslimness' as a way of describing the quality that authentic

Muslims are supposed to possess. In this article then, authentic Muslims possess

Muslimness and one who possesses Muslimness is an authentic Muslim.

Although it is unclear how Muslims' may come to determine what constitutes "genuine, sincere

and legitimate" claims to being Muslim, Moosavi (2012) argues that converts to Islam attempt to

achieve this through performative means, especially dressing "like a Muslim." Thus, the very

Islamic symbols that I discussed in prior sections as racializing the wearer may also be said to

signal the sincerity or legitimacy of their religious identity, at least in the case of converts.

Previous scholarship on Muslim converts has taken into account the way that some

converts begin to dress "Islamically" after converting. For example, Kate Zebiri's (2014) work

discusses the changes in dress that many Muslim converts undergo, especially women. The

adoption of headscarves and other markers of Muslim status is a means of living their religious

faith, but it is also a form of boundary work symbolizing the separation of the convert from their

non-Muslim countrymen. One of Zebiri's (2014:178-9) respondents provides this insight on her

wearing of the *abayya* and *niqab*, a long black gown that covers the full body and a black face

covering that only reveals the eyes:

But once you decide to cover your clothes, it is as if there is no going back – you

have passed the point of no return. And in other people's eyes, you are different

too – you're on a different level….What does the non-Muslim see when he or she

sees us in the street? A relic of a bygone age? A lingering symbol of oppression in

a liberated world? A religious fanatic? A terrorist or terrorist's aide? An outsider, immigrant, interloper?

As I have demonstrated in a previous section, dressing "like a Muslim" has a strong racial dimension because it unintentionally invites racialization, resulting in Muslims being scrutinized, or at least feeling that way, as Zebiri's respondent did in the above quote.

Recent publications by Moosavi (2015a; 2015b) and Galonnier (2015) do draw attention to the clearly racial dimensions of Muslim convert experience by situating the experiences of converts within a framework of contemporary race theory. According to Moosavi, white British converts to Islam find their whiteness compromised. Those that adopt a headscarf or other items of clothing associated with Muslims or the Middle East, or a Muslim sounding name, find themselves re-racialized as "not-quite-white" and become subject to "subtle Islamophobia." Galonnier drew similar conclusions when comparing white American and French converts. "In choosing to make their Muslim spirituality visible," writes Galonnier, "converts discover the world of racial discrimination" (2015:576). This loss of whiteness and white privilege is precisely the experience of Zebiri's (2014) respondent in the above quote, and race theory provides compelling analytical tools and language for understanding this phenomenon.

An important fulcrum on which this authenticity, this Muslimness, rests, is the racial/ethnic identity of the convert. The racial hierarchy of U.S. society is present within religious congregations (Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013). That is to say, the cultural codes of race that permeate American culture may shape the views of congregants. Thus, the racial or ethnic identity of the convert is important to their religious identity, just as "embracing Islam has an impact on converts' perceived racial status" (Galonnier 2015:575).

In summary, *Muslimness* is authenticity as a Muslim (Moosavi 2012), and black and white converts may be regarded as having more or less Muslimness because of the cultural codes associated with each racial/ethnic identity. Further, converts often adopt religious signifiers (such as a headscarf, or Muslim sounding name) as genuine expressions of faith. These signifiers may help them gain more authenticity, but they are also imbued with racialized meanings, which can then have consequences for the wearer, subjecting them to prejudice and discrimination (Moosavi 2015). Convert racial/ethnic identity may impact religious identity, and likewise, convert religious identity may impact racial/ethnic identity.

CHAPTER TWO:

METHODS

Research Questions

This qualitative study of Muslim converts in the United States is built around two research questions, both having to do with aspects of identity. The first inquires as to the ways in which these converts present themselves. This includes how they talk about themselves, especially when talking specifically about their conversion. The second research question inquires as to the ways in which they feel they are perceived by others. This includes a consideration of how they dress, but more directly is concerned with their racial status and its implications for their religious identity. Specifically, I asked *what cultural codes and formula stories these converts employ as they narratively (re)construct their identities through the telling of their conversion narratives*. And I asked *how their racial identity affects, shapes, or otherwise influences their religious identity as Muslim*. These two research questions intersect at the point of what may be called "Muslimness," authenticity, or legitimacy of one's Muslim identity. In a sense, the two research questions underscoring this study can be conflated into a simpler query: can a convert to Islam ever be regarded as truly Muslim and truly American?

Research Design

These two research questions are situated in different sociological literatures—literatures which make different assumptions about social order and social actors, and use different languages to articulate them. With this in mind I employed those assumptions and languages

when dealing with each question. Thus, of the three data chapters that follow, the first one relies on the language of the sociology of narrative analysis. The second and third data chapters address the second research question, and in doing so rely upon the language of race and racialization. Though the shift from one set of assumptions and languages is noticeable and somewhat abrupt, each chapter revolves around the central theme of the larger project. The type of data required to answer my research questions could be best elicited through face-to-face interviews with Muslim converts. This is because the data needed to be rich and descriptive, and would likely take the form of personal vignettes or short narratives. This method was especially appropriate because I was inquiring about personal, lived experiences for which I needed descriptive, in-depth accounts.

The Sample

Muslims comprise approximately one percent of the U.S. population, and converts to Islam comprise less than a quarter of that (Pew 2017), making this a very small population (less than one million nationwide). I employed multiple-strand snowball sampling, starting with Muslim converts I knew personally and then asking them to make referrals. I then contacted non-convert Muslims I knew personally to garner referrals from them. After utilizing these networks, I also reached out to two administrators at a large, multiethnic mosque for their help, as well as an administrator at another mosque, a cultural center, and a university's Muslim student association. Every convert I interviewed was also asked to make referrals. It should be stressed that my sample is not a collection of people close to me. I personally knew only three of the 39 interviewees prior to the study. Another three I had met once each in passing. The remaining 33 were unknown to me before I contacted them for an interview. My sample consisted of 25

women and 14 men. A total of 22 respondents were white (17 white and five white Hispanic), along with 15 black respondents (nine black and six black Hispanic), one of Arabic and Hispanic descent, and one of white and Indian descent. All respondents were U.S. citizens, five having been born outside the country. In terms of age, there was a marked split: half the sample were under the age of 30, a third were age 56 or older, and the remaining few occupied a broad range in-between. Consequently, there was also a vast gap in years lived as a Muslim—some had been Muslim for over 40 years, and some for only a few months. The majority of converts I spoke with were very young when they converted. Two-thirds of them converted before the age of twenty-four. Many were in college and several actually began learning about Islam or even converted while in high school. The vast majority were middle class, with two claiming they earned over 100,000 a year, and a handful earning less than 15,000 (mostly students in part time jobs).

Approximately one-third of my respondents were religiously observant before becoming Muslim, while equal numbers were non-religious. Another third were vague about their prior levels of religiosity, though they did identify with a faith. Those who were religious often brought that up themselves, suggesting that religion was already an important aspect of their identity and that it was important for understanding them. The same may be said for those who were non-religious, as they sometimes spoke of their indifference to or even distaste for religion or religious people prior to their conversion. Whether religiously observant or not, about half at least nominally identified with a faith prior to becoming Muslim. Of these, eight were Catholic, ten were Protestant, and one was Jewish. I did not collect data on their current levels of religiosity. Subjectively speaking, some were much more religious than others.

Categorizing my respondents into Islamic "sects" proved a challenge. I asked respondents if they were "sunni," "shia," or "something else?" Sunni Islam is by far the most common worldwide, and in the U.S. as well (Pew 2017). However, although most of my respondents indicated that they were sunni, many of the older black converts eschewed these categories, choosing instead the third, write-in option. For example, some wrote: "Just a Muslim," or "Follower of Muhammad." These respondents were not particularly forthcoming about their reluctance to self-categorize, though without wishing to over speculate, I noticed that most of them had initially joined the Nation of Islam before transitioning to a more mainstream form of the faith. This may have made them wary of self-categorizations that emphasize difference over unity. This speculation is buttressed by the fact that converts who had previously been in the Nation were always quick to distance themselves from that group, telling me that they did not stay in it for long. Likewise, collecting data on their political leanings proved difficult. Respondents were given a Likert scale ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative," with "moderate" in the middle. Although "moderate" was the most common response, older converts leaned conservative and younger ones leaned liberal. However, it was not uncommon for a respondent to indicate one option and then, anecdotally speaking, exhibit characteristics associated with another. For example, one respondent indicated he was "very liberal," but went on to express views that were, from my vantage point, unmistakably conservative. Another indicated that he was "moderate," but throughout the interview brought up topics like Syrian refugees to the U.S., mirroring "bleeding heart" liberal talking points.

Interviews

Answering my research questions required the collection of in-depth interviews with Muslim converts. These interviews needed to be both structured and open ended to ensure some level of uniformity in the questions that were answered yet also account for the breadth of their experiences. Each interviewee was asked the same ten questions in the same way to allow for comparisons of their responses. Before each interview began I asked respondents if they would like to choose a pseudonym, stressing that I would not use their real name on any transcripts or in any of my writing in order to protect their confidentiality. Additionally, at the beginning of each interview I informed respondents that while answering my questions I wanted to hear about *whatever they felt was important*, and to direct my attention to whatever they felt I should know. I told each interviewee that I saw the interview as being about them and their experiences, their stories, and that they were free to say as much as they like—even if it went off topic. I also told each interviewee that if they later changed their mind about something they had shared with me they could always contact me through email or my personal phone number, both of which I provided on the consent form. The open-ended character of the interviews facilitated generous responses. Many interviewees took the opportunity to "vent" some of their frustrations and spoke candidly about their experiences.

For example, one of the interview questions asked: "Do you ever feel that you have to choose between being a Muslim and being an American? And, if so, who makes you feel that way?" All respondents were asked this question, though it was left to them to interpret. Some chose to speak about non-Muslim Americans who they feel pressure them to choose their American identity over their Muslim one. Conversely, others understood this question as referring to Muslims who they feel pressure them to foreground their religious identity at the cost

of their cultural or national identity as American. Still others challenged the notion that there was a choice to be made. This diversity of interpretation of the question itself was what I wanted, and the data gathered tells a rich story.

The interviews themselves ranged from approximately 45 minutes to two hours, and took place in a variety of locations. Several were conducted on a university campus, either because the respondent was a student at the university, or an employee, or simply because it was a convenient place to meet on a weekend. Several took place in coffee shops, though this sometimes proved unfeasible because of noise or privacy issues, and two such interviews beginning in a coffee shop quickly moved to my car. A smaller number took place in respondents' homes. Two interviews were held in offices—one at a financial institution, the other at an Islamic charity. Only one was held in a mosque. As noted above, my sample consisted of more women than men. In some cases, these women did not wish to meet with me alone but would agree to meet if my wife were present, therefore she was present at four such interviews. Three other interviews were conducted in concert, such as interviewing husband and wife, or two female friends, simultaneously. Still others were conducted over the phone, as a handful of respondents lived in other states (I collected basic demographics of the Muslim communities they belonged to).

Positionality

I made my status as a convert known to respondents before each interview took place. I made sure to divulge this information early in order to build rapport and establish a sense of trust before delving into the interviews themselves. I am certain that some of the interviews would not have taken place were I not myself Muslim. For example, Melanie told me, "It does make a

difference knowing that you are a convert because of interactions that I've had—knowing that you are in the same boat." However, it is impossible to know exactly how this may have shaped what my respondents said, or did not say, during our interviews. What I can say is that for my part I tried to impress upon them that I was, above all, curious, fascinated even, by their stories. When possible I would point out similarities in their experiences and my own. I was concerned that doing so could lead them toward certain answers or topics, but I felt it was necessary that I divulge some personal information as well.

My status as an insider/outsider provided me a unique vantage point from which to approach this research, from conceptualization to data collection and analysis. As a member of the population that I studied, I often found myself comparing my own experiences with those of my respondents—and the similarities were many. Yet I also entered this project understanding that my own experiences were likely atypical of other American converts considering that my own experiences with Muslim communities have largely occurred outside the U.S. context (as I lived outside the U.S. for eight years). Further, much of my interaction with other Muslims within the U.S. has been with the Turkish community, themselves a minority among Muslims in this country. This contrasts with most Muslim communities in the U.S., which are either predominantly African American, Arab, South Asian, or mixed. In addition, the fact that I am married to a Turkish woman has clearly assisted my incorporation into the Turkish communities in each of the cities in which I have lived. Taken together, these factors may have shaped my experiences in ways incommensurate with many in my sample. This is all to say that while I enjoy an insider status, I do not pretend to have expertise on what it is to be an American Muslim convert, which I took to heart when carrying out the analysis.

Analysis

Coding the data involved an especially painstaking process. To begin, I created two diagrams for each respondent. These were used to organize main points or brief snippets of dialog pertaining to specific questions. These diagrams had the appearance of pie charts, with a "slice" designated for each interview question, plus several additional slices for emergent themes that were not part of the original interview schedule. While performing a close reading of each interview question, pertinent details and quotes were filled in by hand on the pie chart diagram. Once I had completed my initial reading of the transcripts, and had created two diagrams for each respondent, I moved on to the next stage. Here, I shuffled the diagrams into random order. Then, one question at a time, I consulted each diagram, allowing me to identify emergent themes. These themes were then coded onto a master sheet which allowed me to observe all responses and make counts of their frequency. For example, when examining responses to how their family and friends reacted to their conversion, I made a column on the master sheet of every type of response, and a running tally of the number of interviewees who had answered in each way. Doing so revealed that "family disapproved" was the most common theme, with 24 of 39 respondents reporting so.

Having obtained the thematic responses and their frequencies, I again consulted the diagrams, this time to collate a list of which interviewees spoke to which themes. Next, I copy/pasted chunks of their transcripts into a word document for another close reading and in-depth analysis. This document now had all the data that would eventually end up in the chapter (and much that would not). After printing out this new document of interview vignettes, I used colored pencils to code them for thematic highlights, points of intersect, and points of divergence. Doing so helped me divide the bulky chunks of transcript into portions that were

essential, and portions that were tangential or otherwise off topic. I then selected a handful of vignettes that best elucidated the main themes spoken of by my respondents, lightly-edited them for content and readability, and used them as the foundation for the write-up.

I then moved on to the next interview question, reshuffling the diagrams and starting the process over. This process involved considerable backtracking, as I had to re-read portions of the transcripts during each coding period to ensure that I had acquired a sufficient understanding of the main points made by each respondent and included the choicest vignettes. Once the above process was complete, I moved on to creating a "mind map" for each data chapter. These organizational tools were made online using the coggle.it website which enabled me to arrange and re-arrange the organization of each chapter before writing it. For example, the mind map for the third chapter went through four major reorganizations before the chapter was written. This enabled me to test out different ways of presenting the data before committing to any of them.

Obstacles

There were a number of unexpected problems that arose during data collection. The initial roster of ten converts from which I intended to begin my interviews was quickly reduced by half as possible respondents began to drop out, especially men. For example, one possible respondent, who had been informed of the project months before interviews began and knew of my interest in interviewing him, moved to a different city after finding a new job, and then ignored my attempts to reconnect with him through social media. Another possible respondent, who likewise knew of my interest in interviewing him and had even agreed to take part in the study, also became elusive, ignoring repeated email attempts to contact him. Another potential respondent agreed to be interviewed on two separate occasions, neither of which took place.

After failing to show up the first time, he apologized, recommitted for a different day and time, and then again failed to show up. Another man agreed to an interview after I first interviewed two of his friends, both of whom referred him, and then subsequently began ignoring my attempts to contact him.

Women were much more accommodating, and some, especially black women, characterized their participation in the study as a quasi-religious obligation on their part. This may help explain why my sample skews so heavily female (24 of 39). However, the total number of female participants could have been even higher were it not for the fact that a number of them did not want to be interviewed by a man, or felt that their husband would object. One potential respondent initially agreed to an interview, but then kept postponing. She eventually told me that her husband did not want her to meet with another man. I arranged for my wife to be present, and she again agreed, only to once again renege. This individual finally agreed to a telephone interview, yet upon calling her at the time we had settled upon she feigned confusion and treated my call as if I were an unwelcome telemarketer. When I reminded her that I was calling about the interview she told me that the hair salon she funs was not hiring. I finally caught up with her a few months later at the wedding of a mutual acquaintance. We ended up sitting at the same table for two hours, where we "politely" ignored each other.

CHAPTER THREE:

ABSTRACT

Previous research utilizing conversion narratives to understand how and why people convert has been troubled by the "accuracy" of the accounts. This study of Muslim converts in the U.S. sidesteps this problem by turning the focus away from the causes, motives, and drivers of conversion, and placing it instead on the form or structure of their conversion narratives. More specifically, it foregrounds the subjective process of making sense of one's conversion story through the employment of formulaic narrative structures. Findings suggest that when accounting for their conversion to Islam, these respondents employed three different narrative structures: stories of awakening, continuity, and return. Though these stories vary in meaningful ways, each provides a different perspective on how conversion to Islam can be conceptualized and expressed narratively. The discussion centers on the similarities and differences between these stories in order to more fully articulate and distinguish their underlying premises. I conclude by considering how each of these stories are used by converts to convey the authenticity of their Muslim identities.

CHAPTER THREE:

CONVERSION TO ISLAM: NARRATIVES OF AWAKENING, CONTINUITY, AND RETURN

In a time of increasing secularization (Bruce 2011; Chaves 2017) and Islamophobia (Cainkar 2011; Duss et al. 2015; Sides & Mogahed 2018), it is perhaps notable to find Americans converting to Islam. Recent estimates suggest that converts account for 22 percent of the total Muslim American population (Mohamed and Podrebarac Sciupac 2018), though reliable measures of the number who convert each year are difficult to pin down. Scholars have typically characterized religious conversion as a radical or profound transformation (Beit-Hallahmi 2014; Snow and Machalek 1984). Given Islam's notoriety in the U.S. context, this is made all the more notable. Social actors who undergo such a "profound transformation" may be asked to provide accounts (Orbuch 1997) of how and why they have done so to curious relatives, friends, and coworkers. The extent to which these accounts have similar themes with predictable elements make them comparable to what scholars refer to as "formula stories," commonly told stories about particular types of people engaging in recognizable and predictable patterns of action (Loseke 2007; 2012). These stories are regarded as believable in as much as they follow the social logic particular to their audience or "thought community" (Zerubavel 1996). The current study is concerned with identifying, describing, and analyzing the use of formula stories in Muslim conversion narratives.

Previous research on religious conversion has observed that converts' personal conversion narratives tend to adhere to a fixed script (Rambo 1993). Consequently, observers

have argued that these narratives may not accurately reflect the hows and whys behind these conversions (Snow and Machalek 1984). The current study is not concerned with the causes or processes of their conversion—nor with the fidelity of their accounts—but rather converts' employment of particular narrative structures (i.e., formula stories) when giving accounts of their pre- and post-conversion selves for an audience. More specifically, the current study asks: which narrative structures, do Muslim converts invoke when providing accounts of their conversion? I collected conversion narratives from 39 U.S. citizens who had converted to Islam and explored them to identify, compare, and contrast the narratives in use.

Three distinct kinds of stories emerged from the analysis. The first story corresponds closely to what Thomas DeGloma (2010; 2014) calls "the awakening story," in which converts describe their conversion as a profound personal change. The second narrative corresponds with what Erin Johnston (2013) has called a "rhetoric of continuity." These rhetorics, which I refer to as continuity narratives, recount not change but rather consistency of personal beliefs and identity. More specifically, I found some interviewees using a variation of the continuity story which emphasizes both continuity of belief (e.g., in God) and disbelief (e.g., in Christ's divinity). And finally, my interviewees also employed a third story, the return narrative, which is predicated upon the well-known motif of "coming home." Their use of the return narrative took two forms: first, that Islam is the original religion of Abraham, and second, that we are all created in a natural state of belief in and submission to God. Thus, by converting, the convert returns to the original religion and/or to the natural state of belief in which they were created.

I begin by explaining the difference between prior research on religious conversion which also employs narratives and my use of a narrative analytical approach. I continue by outlining some of the key elements of this approach and why it is especially appropriate to my study, and

then provide a description of the research methods I used. Next, I provide interview vignettes exemplary of the awakening, continuity, and return narrative structures. In the discussion I compare and contrast the three narrative structures and conclude by considering how they are used to signal authentic religious identities.

Narrative Analysis

In its simplest form, narrative is "someone telling someone else that something happened" (Kreiswirth 2000:294). This often takes the form of arranging events not only temporally but also in terms suggesting cause and effect (Polletta et al. 2011), to express a point or moral to the intended audience (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Narratives are notoriously subjective, but certain components remain universal (Lawler 2008)—characters, action/event, and plot/structure (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Kirkman 2002). *Characters* may be specific individuals, but often take the form of generalized types of people. *Action* refers to the events which take place within the narrative, such as a challenge to be met or difficulty to be overcome. And *plot* refers to the actual structure of the story, the "order, sequence, and meaning" (Kirkman 2002:33). Narratives also feature other components, such as time, and scene or context, but I will limit my discussion of narratives to those aspects most pertinent to the current study. Broadly speaking, narratives are the stories that make our lives—and the world in which we live— meaningful to us (Bruner 1990). However, the specific utility of narratives with which I am most concerned is their utility in explaining how and why something happened, such as a religious conversion. Additionally, I am concerned with how narratives can situate events using the cultural frameworks of a particular audience, and in so doing appropriate a sense of credibility to the story and signal an affiliation or belonging with that audience (Binklry 2007). Put differently,

"Humans shape and comprehend their lives by telling stories," (Rambo 1999:265), yet these stories are not simple recaps of what actually took place. Storytellers make their narratives believable by shaping them around the evaluative criteria (Loseke 2007:680) of their intended audience, thereby demarcating their relationship to that audience.

Narratives do a lot of important work, but they are not always presented to listeners in a straightforward way. As noted by Boje (2001), narratives do not always follow a linear fashion, and thus narrative analysis need not be limited to a "narrow" examination of plots. Therefore, my approach is less concerned with the formal aspects of storytelling (i.e., exposition, climax, etc.) and more so with identifying the broader, formulaic patterns upon which these conversion narratives are structured. Ricoeur's (2010) concept of *emplotment* tells us that stories are made by stringing together cause and effect relationships and nesting them into ready-made narrative structures. Further, Ricoeur (2010) states that emplotment requires that the storyteller and the audience have "pre-understanding" and "context." As I will explain in a later section, this pre-understanding and context comes in the form of cultural codes and social logic, which may be thought of as heuristics of social types, and learned ideas about how the world works and how to make sense of it, respectively. Storytellers must know their audience and the types of stories that audience would find believable in order to "emplot" their story into one of these pre-existing narrative structures.

Biographical Reconstruction

Previous scholarship on religious conversion has sometimes used conversion narratives as data to uncover the processes by which people convert into—and out of—a religion, and the host of psychological and social factors that contribute to or otherwise facilitate such decisions

(Beit-Hallahmi 2014; Gooren 2010; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Zuckerman 2012).

Yet this approach has likewise been met with criticism for producing accounts muddled in their validity (Snow and Machalek 1984). The problem is that when providing accounts of their conversion, converts are known to reframe their life stories in a manner that reflects their current, post-conversion worldview rather than their previous one. This tendency to reinterpret or re-imagine one's life story in accordance with a new worldview is known as *biographical reconstruction* (BR) (Snow and Machalek 1984). BR has several core features: first, these narratives follow group-specific guidelines for interpreting certain experiences. Secondly, conversion narratives do not remain fixed, but rather are reconstructed continuously in light of new experience. Lastly, because "past activities are viewed in a new light through reassessment and selective recollection" (Webster and Mertova 2007:76-7) these narratives tell us more about the convert's current experience and orientation than about their past (Snow and Machalek 1984).

This is not to suggest that converts lie about who they are/were, but rather that they think differently about themselves now than they did before. For example, a convert may describe their previous self by saying "Before I became x, I was lost, I was searching." Yet scholars looking for objective accounts to help them understand what kinds of people are more or less likely to convert, and why cannot know for sure that these individuals really did regard themselves as "lost" and "searching" before they converted, or if, post-conversion, they have come to regard their previous self in that way, perhaps because such a view is in keeping with the worldview they acquired *after* converting. Stark and Finke (2000) have argued that the claim made by some converts that they had been looking for a new worldview or religion—referred to in the literature as "seekership"—is itself an act of biographical reconstruction. Were they truly religious seekers

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before conversion, or did they stumble upon a new faith, embrace it, and then come to believe that it was what they were looking for all along?

But why should this trouble us? Biographical reconstruction is not particular to converts. As Kirkman (2002) writes, the "sense of stability and consistency experienced over the course of life results primarily from *continuing reconstructive activity*" (p. 32, emphasis mine). Giddens (1991) argues that modernity presents to us a world of constant change, therefore requiring each of us to develop a narrative of self that can tie our lives together, to provide us a sense of self that feels stable and consistent. Everyone engages in BR, as we continuously make sense of our lives in light of new experiences. In fact, if one is less concerned with the *causes* of conversion than with the *meaning* of conversion for the individual's identity, BR becomes a most welcome avenue of analytic inquiry. The insights of narrative analysis reveal that personal narratives always involve "some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters" (Ewick and Silbey 1995:200). In BR we reframe our past lived experiences—both before and after conversion, or any other significant change—according to our present worldview—a worldview informed, in part, by the prevailing social logic of those with whom we identify. We do this all the time by taking the disparate, unconnected, spurious, and idiosyncratic events, moments, and experiences from our lives and fashioning them into a package that is coherent and intelligible to our audience—ourselves included.

Thus, biographical reconstruction is central to my use of the narrative analytic approach. Whereas some may shun the use of conversion narratives as too ambiguous, it is precisely because of their subjective character that they are of interest to me (Poletta et al. 2011). Converts are drawing from a set of ideas, beliefs, and assumptions to piece together a story that their audience will believe and react to favorably. "In telling a life," writes Lawler, "people are

simultaneously interpreting that life" (2008:14). That is, they craft a story intended to invoke a desired impression in the minds of their audience. Because of this tendency toward biographical reconstruction and the appropriacy of the narrative analytic method to unpack this phenomenon, I pursue narrative analysis of conversion stories as a vehicle for understanding how converts to Islam account for their conversion, and further, use the telling of these stories to authenticate their religious identities. Narratives of conversion therefore present an exciting window into the re-articulation of social identity in which converts engage. We are the stories we tell, about ourselves and to ourselves. Therefore, narratives of conversion matter in the most intimate way to converts' identities.

Formula Stories, Cultural Codes, and Muslim Americans

People use narratives to make sense of their lives. More specifically, we use *formula stories*—commonly told stories about types of people which follow a predictable series of events (Loseke 2007; 2012). Formula stories are oft-repeated and ubiquitous. We have them for falling in love, graduating from high school, working a summer job, etc. To some extent, we share many of these same experiences and therefore really do have somewhat similar stories to tell. Yet it is also the case that formula stories are so prevalent because they allow us to take the chaos of our own idiosyncratic experiences and arrange them into recognizable and believable narratives.[1] Consequently, our personal stories are believable and seen as true in as much as they follow the scripts of culturally accepted formula stories and cultural codes of our intended audience. In doing so, storytellers must exercise a kind of *social logic*, considering the perspectives, appraisals, and attitudes of people in one's immediate social networks—in this case their story audience (Zuckerman 2005). Social logic guides what can and should be said, and how it can and

should be said, depending on the thought community to which one is speaking and "the conditions under which [the story] is remembered" (Riessman 1989:744). In other words, the kinds of stories we tell a particular audience—and the way we tell them—are partially contingent on what we know about that audience: how they think, what they value, how they are likely to perceive certain details within the story, or morally evaluate decisions made by the protagonist. A story told to an audience comprised of our own thought community may be markedly different than one told to a thought community to which we do not belong. Formula stories may be said to follow the social logic of the intended audience, but both are themselves comprised of *cultural codes*, constellations of ideas, beliefs, presumptions, attitudes, and moral evaluations associated with different types of people[2] (Loseke 2007; 2012). The "disparate bits of information" (DiMaggio 1997:263) that make up cultural codes may be widely shared and recognized among the members of a culture, yet also tailored to the social logic of specific thought communities. The formula stories people utilize when telling stories about themselves are contingent upon the prevailing cultural codes of their immediate context (Loseke 2007; 2012). It is within these contexts that interpretive meanings are drawn, reproduced, and reified.

Much like the Orientalist categories of "good" and "bad" Muslims (Ramadan 2010), the cultural codes informing current thinking about Muslims both exploit and reinforce a binary set of formula story characters: villains and victims. Consider news stories about Syrian refugees resettling in the United States—the majority of whom are Muslim. Some portray Syrian refugees as wolves in sheep's clothing who are here to harm us, such as a piece in the *National Review* suggesting that ISIS members have infiltrated Europe by claiming refugee status, and now have their sights set on the U.S. (Babin 2016). Such portrayals of Muslims go back over a century (Said 1978; 1981). The competing code of Muslims as victims appears to be newer, and seems to

have gained increasing traction in recent years (Shauk and Carroll 2011). News reports sometimes portray Syrian refugees as innocent victims who deserve our sympathy after being forced from their homes and even their country by the violence of madmen. Reporting by *National Public Radio* laments the dramatic decrease in the number of refugees accepted into the U.S. since Trump took office (Amos 2018).[3] Which news stories one finds credible is a matter of which cultural codes they adopt regarding Muslims. News outlets take into account the assumptions their audience makes about the world around them and the people in it, and tailor their stories around that social logic. As storytellers, we do the same in our everyday interactions. In our current geo-political moment, stories of refugees from Syria and elsewhere are all too common, and the formulas and codes these stories employ are easily identifiable.

But converting to Islam is not common, and it rarely, if ever, makes the news, save perhaps a special interest piece here and there. Converting to a different religion is not part of the regular life course for most people, and conversion to Islam is even less common—calling the appropriacy of formula stories as a conceptual tool for interpreting them into question. However, as I will show, the stories my interviewees tell had most of the characteristics of formula stories. Their stories had recognizable characters (the "convert type"), action (befriending a Muslim, reading about Islam, etc.), and well-established, predictable plots (such as awakening to a new truth, staying true to what one has always believed, and returning to a previously known truth). Unlike formula stories, the conversion narratives told by my interviewees did not come with expected morals, as converting to Islam is, as noted above, not a common practice for Americans. Therefore, I take formula stories as a model but use the less specific term, *narrative structure*, to emphasize the common patterns and elements of their stories. So then what are the

characteristics of the stories they tell? What are the narrative structures they use to account for converting to Islam? How do Muslim converts make sense of their decision?

Methods

These research questions require in-depth interviews about the pre-and post-conversion lives of Muslim American converts. Muslims comprise approximately one percent of the U.S. population, and converts comprise less than a quarter of that, making this a very small population (less than one million nationwide) (Pew 2017). I employed multiple-strand snowball sampling, starting with Muslim converts I knew personally and then asking them to make referrals. I then contacted non-convert Muslims I knew personally to garner referrals from them. After utilizing these networks, I also reached out to two administrators at a large, multiethnic mosque for their help, as well as an administrator at another mosque, a cultural center, and a university's Muslim Student Association. I also asked every convert I interviewed to make referrals. After 15 months I finished data collection in December 2017, having collected 39 interviews. I should stress that my sample is not a collection of people close to me. I personally knew only three of the 39 interviewees prior to the study. Another three I had met once, each, in passing. The remainder were unknown to me before the interview. The interviews were primarily face-to-face, though a few had to be conducted over the phone because the interviewee lived out of state. I typically met interviewees in public settings, such as parks or coffee shops. A few invited me to their homes, and a few interviews were conducted in my office at my university. The immediate context of their recollection of these stories was a semi-structured interview conducted by the author, a fellow convert. Each interview was digitally recorded and precisely transcribed. My sample had more women (25) than men (14), all of whom were U.S. citizens. Just under half the

respondents identified as white, almost a third identified as black, and the remainder identified as Hispanic. In terms of age, there was a marked split: half the sample were under the age of 30, a third were age 56 or older, and the remaining few occupied a broad range in-between. Consequently, there was also a vast gap in years lived as a Muslim—some had been Muslim for over 30 years, and some for only a few months.

The data come from a fixed interview question, supplemented with follow-up questions intended to elicit further contextualizing details. I asked each interviewee, "Can you tell me what was going on in your life when you became a Muslim? How did you come to Islam?" Before posing this question, I instructed interviewees to be as thorough and candid as was comfortable to them, and that I, the interviewer, was interested in anything they had to say. In many cases the interviewees left out what Webster and Mertova (2007) refer to as the "critical event." In the case of religious conversion, the *critical event* would be the incident, realization, or element of action that is of most consequence in spurring their decision to convert. I attempted to rectify this by asking follow-up questions such as "Was there one specific thing that convinced you to become Muslim?" or "can we talk about your first mosque experience?" At times this worked, such as when one interviewee clarified that he had a "mystifying experience" on a trip to Egypt. However, at other times this resulted in the interviewee simply providing a justification for their conversion rather than any such "critical event." Additional follow-up questions inquired as to their age, occupation, and city or town they lived in at the time of conversion, if these or similar details were left out of the initial story.

Because organizing our lives in the form of a story is a crucial way in which we make sense of the idiosyncrasies of our experiences, examining the stories people tell about themselves is a fruitful avenue of inquiry. The narrative elements of most interest here are the plot, or

narrative structure into which their story is "emplotted" (Ricoeur 2010), and the cultural codes (Loseke 2007; 2012) they draw upon to contextualize their story within a framework of shared meanings. I began by working inductively, reading the transcripts to uncover the general formula story style patterns emerging from the stories, which I then classified into types. Three types of stories were evident, and subsequent re-readings of the transcripts allowed me to more fully delineate the contours of each narrative structure.

Snowball sampling has limitations, not the least of which is the lack of generalizability. However, I make no claims to generalizability in the analysis, beyond the fact that the basic narrative structures my interviewees used to tell their stories are common and recognizable. Further, using a narrative analytic approach, I do not ask the extent to which these narratives convey an empirically verifiable "truth." Indeed, the stories respondents told me may very well have been different if their audience had been different. In other words, these are the stories of their conversion that they told to a person most of them had never met before, a researcher who was recording their responses so he could analyze them later. I take these stories as just that: stories. And although they were often rich in detail and nuance, these conversion narratives were just as often too long, and explained in too circuitous a manner, to reproduce here. In what follows, I provide concise vignettes which illustrate the narrative structures they employed.

Awakening Narratives

The first narrative structure is one that adheres most closely to scholarly definitions of conversion. Scholars studying conversion have offered very similar definitions of the phenomenon, almost always focusing on the dramatic or profound change it is thought to entail. Conversion is usually characterized as a "radical change" (Greil 1977:116), sometimes even as a

"metamorphic sort of change" (Snow and Machalek 1984:170), or a "miraculous transformation" (Beit-Hallahmi 2014:155). Thomas DeGloma (2014:2) says much the same when describing conversion as a "radical transformation of consciousness, a fundamental change in their perception of their lives and their orientation to the world around them." DeGloma (2010; 2014) calls narrative accounts of such radical transformations *awakening stories*, defined as a generic formula story that, "with slight changes… can be used to undermine and reject any one system of meaning and pave the way to justify and defend any newly acquired worldview" (2014:11-12). In awakening stories, converts describe experiences of "seeing the light," a metaphor commonly associated with revelations of truth. DeGloma (2014) outlined the plot of the awakening formula story thusly:

> [1] storytellers account for a past state of 'darkness', [2] describe their experience
>
> of discovery and personal transformation, [and 3] account for a current state of
>
> 'light' and commonly describe having found their true place in the world (p. 13-
>
> 14).

In this narrative structure, the storyteller, in this case a religious convert, begins by describing the ignorance of their past beliefs, or lack of belief. Next, they explain how they came to learn the "truth" about themselves and the world. Finally, they further mark the totality of this change by contrasting their past ignorance with their current state of enlightenment.

Awakening stories are not limited to experiences of religious conversion. The politically disengaged are said to become "woke" when they begin to think more critically about issues of social justice. The implication being that they were previously oblivious to a moral reality that they now see quite clearly. Alternatively, young people who have rejected the liberalism of their parents, schools, and communities to embrace conservatism describe themselves as having been

"red-pilled,"[4] a reference to the film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist takes a red pill as part of his initiation into the hidden truths of his world. In each case the awakening story follows the same formula: converts metaphorically move from darkness to light, from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment.

Some of the converts I spoke with told stories that fit the awakening narrative. Consider the example of Aminah, a black Hispanic, 35-year-old teacher from Cuba who had lived in the U.S. for about six years and had been a Muslim for five years. Before converting, Aminah describes herself as an unhappy, non-religious person who knew almost nothing about Islam. In learning about and eventually converting to Islam she underwent a dramatic transformation, going from depressed and hopeless to seeing life as a Muslim as meaningful and fulfilling. In the following vignette, Aminah emphasizes the darkness of her pre-Islamic life, in which she found herself, at the age of 24, divorced, depressed, and abusing alcohol.

> So, I wasn't understanding the purpose of life. I went crazy partying. The things I
> didn't do at 18 I started doing at 24: partying, drinking . . . . I became very
> depressed. Very, very depressed—like to me the life didn't make sense anymore.
> So, I said you know what, let me read the Bible to calm myself. What I was
> feeling, it was so bad. So, I started reading the Bible by myself. I didn't want to
> go to the church to study, you know, the people wash my brain, making me think
> what they want me to think. So, I started reading the Bible from Genesis page
> one—and I became more depressed. More and more depressed. I was like, this is
> the Word of God? The only source, all we have, and I cannot understand it, and it
> does not make sense to me. How am I supposed to be connected with God?

Though Aminah insisted that she was never very religious, she turned to the Bible for answers, inspiration—anything that could help her put her life back in order. This period of "darkness" was exacerbated by her fruitless attempt at finding solace in the Bible. One day a Muslim acquaintance said something over coffee that challenged her thinking about Islam, enough that she sought a local mosque and paid them a few visits. It took over a year of study, but eventually Aminah made the decision to convert. Whereas before her life was marred by depression, a lack of purpose or meaning, and an apparent lack of agency to turn things around, her post-conversion life is the opposite.

> My daily Muslim life is awesome! Let me tell you why. The Qur'an says something: when you wanna take steps toward Allah, He will take steps toward you. But you are the one that has to make the first step. . . . So you have to make the first step, and you have to be honest. Since I became Muslim I have that on my mind, I'm not a perfect person, but I try my best.

Aminah contrasts her old life with her new one by showcasing how she is "tak[ing] steps toward Allah," as instructed by the Qur'an. She understands this as integral to experiencing a fulfilling life as a Muslim. This contrasts sharply with her old life in which she looked for guidance in the Bible but found none. Whereas before Aminah wondered, "How can I have a connection with God?", now as a Muslim she feels that not only does she have that connection but that she has the agency to strengthen it as well.

Another example can be found in the story of Tony, a white, 21-year-old college student who had been Muslim for only a month at the time of interview. He provided an account of his conversion that touched on all points of the awakening narrative. After befriending some Muslim students at his university, Tony began learning about by watching videos of Islamic preachers

and engaging his Muslim friends in discussion. He had no intention of converting at first, but soon found himself "rooting for the other side."

> So, I think one of the things that drew me in first—more than anything, that I was like, "Wow, I'm gonna really look into this and seriously consider this"—was when I saw prayer for the first time. That drew me in a lot. I started listening to lectures, Imam Omar Suleiman, and at first when I was studying it was kind of just what I had done with my earlier studies in religion when I was like, "Why doesn't this make sense?" And I don't know exactly what happened, but I just started kind of rooting for the other side I guess. I made that switch over to, "You know, this makes sense and I agree." I don't know exactly what it was. I think there's a lot of, a lot of it is rational in Islam. A lot of it is founded in science. It doesn't discredit the search for truth and search for knowledge, so I think that was one of the qualities that really drew me in.

> **So what do you mean you switched sides?**

> So yeah, like at the beginning I was like, let me find why this doesn't make sense to me, find why this is wrong. I would debate with my Muslim friends, but then I was just listening to lectures and debates and stuff and I started just like... thinking, instead of thinking like, "Why doesn't this make sense?" to "This really does make sense!" And started thinking about converting pretty early on and it was a pretty quick process.

Tony began by describing a critical event, when he "saw prayer for the first time." Although it is unclear how witnessing this act of worship "drew him in" (even Tony seems uncertain: "I don't know exactly what it was"), what is clear is that this experience led him to question his

understanding of Islam, and thus represents the moment he began to shift from his prior state of "ignorance" to one of "truth." Tony explicitly stated the shift in his thinking, from "Why doesn't this make sense?"—a statement illustrating his prior attitude that no religion made sense, and that by learning about Islam he would soon uncover its own inherent nonsense, to "This really makes sense!"—a statement suggesting both that Islam contains some inherent quality of truth and that he has come to recognize that truth. He marked the intensity of this shift by stating that he "switched sides." Further, Tony justified this shift in his thinking by saying that Islam is "founded in science," and that it "doesn't discredit the search for truth and search for knowledge." These claims are part of his reasoning that Islam is the true religion. Although he does not specifically mention it in the above vignette, Tony also characterized Christianity as being in conflict with modern science. A claim that served to further distance himself from the Catholic faith in which he had been raised, thereby stressing the extent to which he had changed.

Consider also Lucas, a 30-year-old white man of Spanish and Swedish descent who had been Muslim for about six years. A case manager for abused children and graduate student, Lucas has lived most of his life in the U.S., but also spent time in his parent's home countries, such as attending university in Sweden. Lucas described his pre-conversion self as "Marxist" and "agnostic," and claimed he had studied the world's major religions so he could "disprove them." He told me he initially ignored Islam because it was "probably the craziest religion out of them all, so what's the point?" However, Lucas changed his mind once he overheard a young Muslim woman at his university saying that Muslims believed in Jesus, which piqued his interest.

> She was talking to a Christian guy and I happened to be walking by and the
> Christian guy was like, "Oh, you Muslims don't even believe in Jesus!" And she
> said, "We do believe in him, we just don't believe he was a God, but a prophet." I

actually did not know this, that Islam approved of previous prophets. . . . So, I

downloaded the Swedish translation of the Qur'an and said, "Ok, you've learned

about Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity, Wicca and the Dao, and all this

other stuff, so let's look at this one and see what's wrong with this crazy religion

too." I started reading it, and in all honesty, I think I got through like the first ten

pages and I had to stop 'cause it was so different. The discourse of the Qur'an, the

actual text, it's just so vastly different from any other type of religious text that I'd

ever come across. It's very direct, engaging the reader. God is presented as a first

person, in literary terms. It's not like the first pages of the Bible, where God

remains a third person object. The Qur'an starts, "This is the book of which there

is no doubt"—this is it, this is Me [God] telling you the advice, essentially. So, I

was almost floored by that first part. So that's what got me intrigued. So, after six

months of reading the Qur'an and some basic Islamic history… and uh, and I

waited until I finished reading the Qur'an and a couple other things and I said, this

is true, I can't really explain it any other way.

Like Tony, Lucas experienced a critical event in which he realized his ignorance and awakened

to a new truth. For Lucas, learning that Jesus was considered by Islam to be a prophet sparked

his initial interest, but it was actually reading the Qur'an for himself that "almost floored" him

because it was so "direct, engaging." Rather than confirm his belief that Islam was a "crazy

religion," Lucas came to regard it as true.

The narratives examined so far have been—like most awakening stories—about personal

transformation, yet some of the converts I spoke with also told stories that emphasized the more

social dimensions of that transformation. This variation of the awakening formula story

underscores not only that the individual has undergone a profound change, but that others perceive as much. Take for example the case of Sofia, a black Hispanic, 24-year-old graduate student who converted one year before our interview. Although an atheist at the time, Sofia would often attend attending Islamic style Friday prayers at her elite university as a showing of political solidarity with her friends in the Muslim Student Association. It was during one such congregational prayer that she had a spiritual and emotional experience in which she "cried so much from happiness, and I knew the time had come." The following quote demonstrates her use of language to show that not only had she awakened, but that others could not help but notice this change in her.

> I know that when I interact with non-Muslims is when I really, really get a sense
> of what Islam has done for me. . . . Some people, people who I knew before, are
> now like "Hey, I can't hang out with you because you're too spiritual, you're too
> positive," and I'm like "Oh, man!" But I know that's coming from a place where,
> like I definitely thought that before I became Muslim . . . . It's an honor that some
> people feel that way, although I know that it's because of a deficiency of peace in
> their hearts and I wish that that would go away.

Sofia spoke of "interact[ing] with non-Muslims" as if this type of interaction has now become the exception rather than the norm for her. She further marked the difference between her old and new selves by stating that other people recognize the change in her, and in fact find it difficult to be around her because she has become too "spiritual [and] positive." Sofia even referred to this as an "honor." And although she lamented that people feel intimidated by her due to a "deficiency of peace in their hearts," this statement also reflects the fact that she is no longer one of the unenlightened people.

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The interviewees presented above all used the awakening narrative to emplot their own self-stories about converting to Islam. Most of these stories included a "critical event" (Webster and Mertova 2007) which marked the beginning of the storytellers shift from "ignorance" to "truth." Tony's critical event came when he witnessed Muslims performing congregational prayer for the first time, and for Sofia it was actually participating in one such prayer which convinced her that God was real and Islam was true. For Lucas the critical event occurred when he began reading the Qur'an for himself. While such critical events were common among my interviewees using awakening stories they were less typical of those using other narratives—a finding I attribute to the story structure itself more so than the lived experience of the convert.

As noted at the beginning of this section, DeGloma's (2010; 2014) research on awakening stories suggests that they are ubiquitous, and that the plot points of the awakening formula story hold true regardless of the specifics of each case. It matters little whether the storyteller is embracing a new religion or worldview or rejecting an old one. An individual leaving Christianity for atheism, for example, tells a story remarkably similar to one leaving atheism for Christianity—so long as they use the awakening narrative structure. In each case, the awakener realizes or discovers the "falseness" of their old beliefs and the "truth" of their new worldview. With this understood, it is surprising that although the awakening narrative was popular among my interviewees, another formula story was slightly more common: the continuity narrative.

Continuity Narratives

Despite the utility of the awakening narrative as a means of accounting for personal change, not all of my interviewees used this narrative structure. Erin Johnston's (2013)

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ethnographic study of converts to neo-Paganism brought into focus an alternative model that she calls a *rhetoric of continuity*. Rather than describing a "radical change" in their beliefs, behaviors, or personal identities, Johnston's interviewees articulated a story in which they *did not change*. Instead, they came to realize that they had always been enlightened, that they had always known a deep truth. In this narrative,

> [converts] do not undergo a transformation of the self by adopting a wholly new perspective and way of being…. [but] an uncovering of their true, authentic selves that were previously hidden, forgotten, or not fully articulated (Johnston 2013:561).

In other words, Johnston's (2013) converts did not feel that they had embraced a new belief system or worldview—they had not "awakened" to a new truth—but rather had simply found a new name—Paganism—for the collection of spiritual beliefs they claimed to have held all their lives. This narrative structure is not adequately represented in the literature on conversion because—as Johnston points out—the claim of "no change" is interpreted by scholars as evidence of "non-conversion." I believe that this is a conceptual problem rather than a practical one, as a number of my interviewees told stories of "no change" or perhaps "limited change," but certainly not "transformative change." Further, use of the continuity narrative occurred independent of other signs of conversion, such as *rhetorical indicators*, "discernible [changes] in converts' speech and reasoning" (Snow and Machalek 1984:173). Consider this vignette from Joshua, a white, 38-year-old financial advisor of Jewish and Filipino descent who had been Muslim since he was seventeen.

> I looked at Islam. It seemed, side by side—throwing out cultural issues and discrepancies of what people say Islam is based on the culture versus from a

religious standpoint—and said, "Well, if you actually line it up next to Judaism, they're basically the same thing, outside of saying you have to pray more and you can't drink." And I was like, "Okay, this has answered all of my questions." This was about a year after I started looking into these things.

As a teenager Joshua had begun to ask questions about some thorny theological issues, but was unsatisfied with the answers he got from his Rabbi. Spending time with some of his Muslim friends inspired him to seek out answers in Islam—answers which he preferred. Further, he evaluated the two religions as so similar that he did not have to make any major change in what he believed or how he behaved. From the outside, Joshua's transition from Jewish to Muslim may indeed seem profound—as he moved from one distinct religious category to another—yet he characterized the two faiths as being "basically the same thing," with a few exceptions surrounding "cultural issues and discrepancies."

Whereas Joshua's continuity story focused on the similarities between Judaism and Islam, many of the others were built on expressing a continuity of *disbelief* in some of the central tenets of Christianity. Take for example Melanie, a white, 26-year-old research associate who had been Muslim for about one year before the interview. She was raised Catholic in a "very religious" family, and only became interested in Islam after befriending some Muslims at university.

Growing up Catholic I always went to church, [but] a lot of things just didn't make sense to me; but things did make sense to me in Islam. I never even as a Catholic—before I knew anything about Islam—I never understood how we could say, "There's only one God—oh, by the way, He has a Son.". . . . I found that a lot of those issues I had were resolved in Islam.

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Like some of the Pagan converts Johnston (2013:558) interviewed, Melanie claimed that she was "never a true believer." She may have gone through the motions, such as attending mass with her family, but she maintains she never truly accepted Christian teaching. Melanie's skepticism of the divinity of Christ was echoed by Siddiqah, a black, 64-year-old woman who had been Muslim for over forty years.

> I was never really a Christian. I believed that there was something—I didn't know what it was—that had created all of this and given order to all of this, but I was never really a Christian. I never believed in Jesus as God, or the Trinity, or anything like that.

Siddiqah told me that her family was Methodist, but not particularly religious. She did attend Bible school as a young child, and participated in church choir with her friends, but also made it a point to tell me she "never believed in Jesus as God." The claim of "never [having been] a true believer" was prominent among interviewees using the continuity narrative. Yet I also observed another, unexpected dimension of this narrative. Not only did some of the converts I spoke to distance themselves from Christianity, they also, ironically, used its proximity to Islam as a means of validating their new faith. For example, Kelly, a white, 20-year-old college student who had been Muslim for only a few months, is a prime example of this type of paradoxical account.

> I would say I was never a Christian, even since I was a young child. I couldn't understand Jesus being God, so whenever they were like, "Go ask him into your heart," I just went up there because my friend went up there. So that was never a concern for me 'cause I knew I would never be Christian.
>
> . . . .

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So, I was like, "Wow, this makes sense: all Abrahamic religions have a chance to

go to heaven!" That really resonates well with me because I think if we believe in

the same God then we should have a chance to go to heaven.

Like Melanie and Siddiqah, Kelly claimed to have never really believed in the divinity of Christ.

Yet the second half of Kelly's statement expresses her surprise and excitement at learning that

Islam considers itself an Abrahamic faith, framing itself as a middle ground between Christianity

and Judaism (Abdalati 1981). This is in reference to the Qur'an's inclusion of Christians and

Jews as *ahl al-kitab*, "People of the Book" (alternatively, People of an Earlier Revelation), and

claims that some of them will go to *Jenna*, the Islamic Heaven (Abdalati 1981). The fact that this

"resonates" with her suggests that Islam's closeness to the other Abrahamic faiths somehow

lends it legitimacy. Learning about this specific Islamic belief was also something of a "critical

event" for Kelly, and indeed the only such event mentioned by any interviewee using a

continuity narrative.

Bridget, a white, 30-year-old teacher who converted about nine years before our

interview, provides an even more illustrative example of this irony. She attempted to validate the

truth of Islam by appealing to its closeness to Christianity, while simultaneously distancing

herself from certain aspects of the Christian faith.

Going back for me—the connection Islamically, Christianity bridging that gap for

me—I really struggled with who Jesus was. I'd always *not believed* that he was

God's son because then we'd all be God's son, because if we're all coming from

Adam then aren't we all God's children? I grew up with not being specifically

told, "Jesus is God on earth," *and* I also grew up being told, "We're His children."

So I struggled with the Trinity and understanding those things. I asked lots of

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questions about it and never really got any answers except just having blind faith. So here I come across Islam and this book, and it explains everything about who Jesus was: that he was a Prophet, that they [Muslims] still believe in the divine birth [virgin birth of Jesus], and that he had these miracles because he asked God to give him those miracles—*which the Bible says as well. . . .*That's how I've always explained becoming Muslim: it's not leaving everything, *it's really continuing in what we've always been taught*. So, that's how I wound up becoming Muslim. Falling in love with it through teaching, and then deciding to really learn about it, because this religion is actually not what I thought it was. It has *even more connections and more relation to Christianity* and Abrahamic Law than I thought. (emphasis mine)

Much like Joshua, Bridget had unanswered questions about certain issues in her faith. She attributes her rejection of Christ's divinity to the mixed messages she received about this as a child. Bridget found that in Islam she was able to retain some of her beliefs about Jesus (e.g., his virgin birth and the performing of miracles) while modifying others (e.g., replacing Son of God with Prophet of God). With these concessions made, the two faiths appear more alike than different, and moving from one to another is less of an evolution and more of a modification. She further drives home the connection by tying Islamic teachings about Jesus to "what we've always been taught" in Christianity, and that there are "even more connections" than she had previously thought.

Interviewees such as Bridget and Kelly employed a variation of the continuity narrative that I am calling a *paradoxical continuity narrative*, a story of never having believed in Christianity, yet also drawing upon its proximity to Islam as a means of validating the latter. Not

only does this narrative allow Muslim converts to distance themselves from certain Christian teachings that conflict with their current religious proclivities, it also allows them to legitimize Islam through its close proximity to Christianity. Further, the paradoxical continuity narrative stresses that these converts either do not *themselves* see their conversion as a radical transformation from one faith to another, and/or do not want *their audience* to perceive it as such.

The paradoxical continuity narrative deserves further unpacking. First, their denial of ever having believed in Christianity may have been driven by Islam's rejection and stigmatization of certain Christian beliefs. Many Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and/or that Jesus and God are one and the same, yet these ideas are anathema in Islamic theology. In fact, associating partners with God is a form of *shirk*, one of the few unforgivable sins in Islam (Abdalati 1981). It may be that some converts denied ever having believed in the divinity of Christ, for example, in an attempt to mitigate or deflect the stigma associated with committing—or having previously committed—this major sin. The second element is the emphasis on similarities between Islam and Christianity, which appears to serve several purposes. First, it may make Islam seem more legitimate by its proximity to Christianity, which has long been the most recognized, accepted, practiced, venerated, and institutionalized religion in the United States (Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind 2009). By underscoring Islam's proximity to this "charter" religion, these Muslim converts may be attempting to appropriate that recognition. Another, related purpose may be to make these conversion stories, or the converts themselves, seem more credible to a Christian and/or American audience. Finally, this second element of the paradoxical continuity narrative accentuates the overall theme of "no change."

This section has explored my interviewees' references to Christianity and Judaism when telling stories of their conversion to Islam. Specifically, they either [1] distanced themselves from Judeo-Christian beliefs, [2] emphasized the closeness of those beliefs to Islamic beliefs, or, sometimes, both. The use of this narrative connects to a third narrative structure employed by my interviewees. While Islam's proximity to these other faiths *can* be read as a continuity of belief on the part of the convert—in the sense that they may retain their belief in many of the stories and characters of the Bible—it may also represent an affirmation that by following Islam they are "returning" to the original religion of Abraham.[5]

Return Narratives

Awakening narratives tell of discovering a previously unknown truth, while continuity narratives tell of maintaining a long held but perhaps unnamed truth. By contrast, *a return narrative tells of departing from and returning to a previously held truth*. The return narrative structure is used to tell stories of "getting back to one's roots" or "coming home again." Consider the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son: a father had two sons, one son followed the path of his father and his people, while the younger one ventured out into the world, tasting its pleasures and squandering his inheritance. This wayward son eventually realized the error of his ways and returned to his father in penitent submission (Luke 15:11-32). In this parable the return narrative is used in a narrow sense, as a sort of cautionary tale about individual choices and their consequences, but it can also be used in a broad sense, such as when applied to the larger story told by a religion. For example, most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism tell a story of a continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth, with the ultimate goal of eventually attaining moksha

or nirvana, respectively, understood as liberation from this cycle and a return to a state of harmony with the source of all being (Smith 1991).

My interviewees used the return narrative in both a narrow and broad sense, which can be better understood if we first acquire an understanding of how it corresponds to some basic tenets of Islamic theology. First, that Islam is the original religion followed by Abraham, which, after years of alteration, was restored through Muhammad's Prophethood, and second, that we are all born in a natural state of belief in and submission to God, but are then socialized into the (ir)religion of our families.

In a broad sense, Islam holds that Abraham was a devout servant of God, but his faith and practice—the first monotheistic religion, as it were—were supplanted by Judaism and Christianity. From this perspective, Islam is not a new faith that builds upon Judeo-Christian texts and traditions, but rather the original faith of Abraham from which they diverged (Abdalati 1981; Dirks 2001; 2002). Accordingly, Muhammad simply restored the religion of Abraham to its original, pristine state of strict monotheism (*tawhid*) and submission (*islam*) to the will of God, and converts are thought to be returning to this original religion.

In a more narrow sense, Islam holds that it is a natural way of life designed by God for all Creation.[6] Therefore, by becoming Muslim, the convert does not undergo a radical transformation to something new, nor do they continue as before; rather, the convert to Islam returns to the natural state in which they were originally created (Abdalati 1981). That is to say, one does not convert to Islam, but rather "reverts." Therefore, by becoming Muslim, the convert (or revert) returns to their *fitra*, a natural, pristine state of belief in and obedience to God in which all humans have been created (Esposito 2003), what Wadud (1999) translates as our "primordial nature."

The concept of fitra is deeply woven into ideas of the supposed "naturalness" of Islam, and was invoked by several respondents, even those whose conversion narratives were too circuitous to properly classify. For example, take the words of Hasan, a black, 74-year-old man who converted approximately fifty years ago: "It's a way of life. Islam—the Holy Qur'an teaches us—Islam is not a religion. . . . It's the very nature in which Allah created man." The same sentiment was expressed by Gregory, a black, 69-year-old former prison warden who likewise converted five decades ago: "Islam is a natural religion. . . .[It] identifies with my nature. . . .It's just one of those things, like a nice pair of shoes and a nice suit—it just fits." In what follows I begin with examples of the return narrative used in a broad sense before turning to examples of it being used in a narrow sense.

Greta, a white, 67-year-old woman who had been a Muslim for over 40 years, first became intrigued with Islam through a romantic interest who eventually became her husband. On their first date he told her about the similarities between her Christian faith and his. She eventually became convinced that the message of the Qur'an is for all intents and purposes the same as those of prior revelations, and invoked this similarity when recounting her conversion story.

> God's word never changed. When He sent the Torah to Moses, when he sent the
>
> Bible to Jesus, and when he gave the Qur'an to Muhammad, the words and the
>
> stories are all the same—so it's up to us to point that out to people.

Greta frames God's revelation as constant and uniform when she describes them as "all the same." This may initially appear to be a continuity story, at least as far as the religions are concerned, but this assessment would not apply to her life or her conversion. Greta did not claim that she always believed correctly, nor that she never believed incorrectly, as those employing

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the continuity narrative did. Rather, Greta is saying that God's message to humanity has remained consistent, and by extension, her becoming Muslim entailed a return to the truth of this unchanging message.

Consider also the story told by Clive, a black, 27-year-old man of Jamaican heritage who works as a translator and author. Prior to his conversion about six years before our interview, Clive had been an ordained deacon and youth minister. He had studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Rastafarianism, but only began to learn about Islam indirectly through his study of the Arabic language at a mosque. What he learned resolved some long-standing issues of concern he had about the ethics of Judeao-Christian prophets.

> So, one of my greatest issues was the concept of the prophets within the Christian
>
> tradition, being individuals that committed such egregious sins against, not just
>
> God, but sins that even in their context would… actions that would cause people
>
> to say "How can I possibly believe that you are a person of God?"
>
> ….
>
> And so within that [Arabic language] class obviously I was introduced to a lot of
>
> verses from the Qur'an… Many of these verses explained various stories, and
>
> parts of stories explained within the Old or New Testament. Such as Moses' story,
>
> such as who was Sarah and who was Hagar, the Qur'an coming and rightfully
>
> explaining that these were not just any women, these were women that Abraham,
>
> in essence, was married to. Which means that Ismail [Ishmael] was not an
>
> illegitimate child. He had all the rights of a son. Which is a big difference
>
> between Christian and Islamic theology. . . . That was I think the climax for me in
>
> terms of Islam being the true, or rather the final volume if you will, or final

edition religious text that was sent down by God. So that was, in essence, how I

came to say that Islam was what I wanted to follow.

Clive's reference to Sarah and Hagar contrasts the way Abraham is presented in the Bible and the Qur'an. According to the Bible Abraham married Sarah, kept Hagar as a concubine, and had a son with each. Therefore, Isaac was a legitimate son and Ishmael was not. According to the Qur'an Abraham was married to both women simultaneously, and both sons were legitimate. Clive regarded the second arrangement as more befitting a prophet of God. Learning that Islam had many of the same prophets and stories as the Bible, yet without the morally compromised behavior, led him to believe that Islam was "sent down by God."

As with Greta, Clive's story could also be mistaken for a continuity narrative. Although he claimed to have been irked by the unethical behavior of Biblical prophets before he began studying Islam, Clive did not tell a story of never having really believed in Christianity. On the contrary, he described himself as having been "deeply religious" as a Christian. And while it is true that he continues to believe in many of the same prophets and stories as from the Bible, his conception of them is quite different now than before. Previously, he had been troubled by their having "committed such egregious sins," a concern that he no longer holds. Further, one might argue that Clive awakened to the truth that the prophets were in fact not immoral people. However, in the above quote he regards this not as a new truth, but as the restoration of an old truth, or, as he puts it, "the Qur'an coming and rightfully explaining" the story of Sarah and Hagar, as well as "parts of stories explained within the Old or New Testament." In other words, Clive regards the Qur'an as having corrected supposed errors in the Jewish and Christian texts, shedding false characterizations of the prophets, and therefore returning the faithful to the original, uncorrupted religion of God.

Having examined the "broad" return narrative, I turn now to the "narrow" one, in which storytelling converts spoke of conversion as a return to their natural state of being (i.e., fitra). Natalie, a 25-year-old white Hispanic security guard who converted only a few months before our interview, began by speaking directly to this idea.

> *Everybody is born Muslim* and they just don't know it. That's why when you
> convert, the reason why they are crying and the reason why Muslims are praising
> and hugging and kissing you, and just so happy, is because we believe that you
> *found your way back home*. . . .When I started letting go and accepted God and
> accepted Islam, my life changed for the better. It's just a natural feeling. Anything
> I can do to help the next person *find their way home*, I will. (italics mine)

When Natalie likened converting to Islam to "[finding] your way back home," her story mirrored any other "coming home" style formula story. But by characterizing this return "home" as being commensurate with "accept[ing] Islam," Natalie underscored her belief that "Everybody is born Muslim." Further, by saying that her life "changed for the better" once she "started letting go and accepted God and accepted Islam," Natalie suggested that her becoming Muslim was an act of submission and return.

A final example of the return narrative came from Uzayr, a white Hispanic, 24-year-old Uber driver who had been a Muslim since his early teens. He told me that in middle school he had been a secular humanist in his thinking, but when he learned about Islam in a 7th grade geography class he found himself drawn to its message. Uzayr insisted that he "never believed that Jesus was God," echoing a common refrain from the continuity narratives already presented, but then shifted to a story of return.

In Islam there is this concept, something known as fitra—which is divine

instinct—that we, at the very core of our agency, we come out the womb of our

mother believing what Islam teaches. And I feel like at this young age, that was

really alive for me. The whole concept of Islam just being simple—that God is

One, that the message is one, one final messenger who didn't bring anything new

but continued a message since the dawn of man: that God is One and worship

Him. I like that. . . .The day I converted I was asked why I converted, and I told

people that I don't feel that I chose Islam, I feel that Islam chose me—that God

guided me to it. Me converting has nothing to do with myself, I truly believe that

it's all from God.

Uzayr's comments actually contain both the broad and narrow senses of the return narrative.

Like Greta, he expressed the idea that there has been one "continued message since the dawn of

man" (i.e., Islam). And like Natalie, he stated that we "come out of the womb of our mother

believing what Islam teaches." He also said that "Islam chose me," rather than he himself having

chosen the faith. Again, like Natalie, Uzayr suggests that his conversion was an act of submitting

to God's plan, that "God guided me to it."

Each of these return narratives tells a story of having departed from a previously known

truth, only to eventually return. This story was used by my interviewees in two ways, both of

which are in accord with Islamic theology. Some told stories of Islam being a restoration of the

religion of Abraham. By becoming Muslim one returns to this original monotheistic faith. Others

told stories of having been born Muslim, raised in a different faith by their families, and then

returning to Islam through their conversion. In the next section, I wish to further delineate what I

see as significant differences between the return narrative and the others—especially as they are used by converts to Islam.

Comparing the Return and Awakening Narratives

The return narrative has some aspects in common with the awakening and continuity stories, but with important differences. For example, the return narrative may at times appear to be a variation of the awakening story, but this similarity dissolves upon closer inspection. For example, the Muslim converts employing return narratives do see themselves as having moved from ignorance to truth, and as such have "seen the light"—just like in the awakening narrative. However, rather than going through a profound change to become someone *new* (e.g., personally, socially, spiritually), they talked about themselves as having returned to a *previous* condition: "the very nature in which Allah created man!" (Hasan); "found your way back home" (Natalie); "the very core of our agency" (Uzayr). Further, there is a "profound change" in the return narrative, albeit one that took place long before the person "converted." If we are all born Muslim by default, then being raised Jewish, agnostic, Hindu, or anything else *is the profound change*; becoming Muslim again is simply a return to who we were at birth.

Alternatively, the awakening story may also be translated into a return story. Rather than awakening to some *new* truth to which they had previously been unaware, these converts are reintroduced to an *old* truth they had once known. Consequently, although they are awakening to a truth that sets them apart from those still mired in darkness, they are also returning to the truth of Islam, putting them once again in harmony with the rest of Creation—which is in all ways and always in a state of *islam* (i.e., submission to God). Thus, the awakening narrative's transition "from darkness to light" is modified into "a return to the light from whence one came."

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Yet the differences between the awakening and return narratives may be unpacked further still by comparing and contrasting Christian and Islamic understandings of conversion. Christianity presents us with an awakening narrative: we are all born with Original Sin (in a state of darkness, ignorance) and must become Christian—however that may be defined by the particular Christian sect—to receive atonement through Christ's sacrifice (Cate 1991; Dirks 2001). In other words, becoming Christian entails a radical transformation from being damned to being saved. It is no wonder that Paul's Road to Damascus story—in which he literally saw the light, and three days later "things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight" (Acts 9:18)—has become the quintessential example of religious conversion (James 1902). By comparison, Islam has no doctrine of Original Sin (Abdalati 1981; Dirks 2001). Quite the opposite, as the logic of the return narrative assumes. The Qur'an states, "… no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another" (53:38, Yusuf Ali translation), meaning that the actions of Adam and Eve have no bearing on any other human and do not mar or otherwise taint them spiritually. Further, Islamic theology holds that God has sent numerous prophets to preach the message of "no god but Allah"—each individual then chooses to heed that message or not (Büyükçelebi 2003; Hamid 1989). As the Qur'an states:

> We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them. Now Allah leaves straying those whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases: and He is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom. (Qur'an 14:4, Yusuf Ali)

This Qur'anic verse is typically interpreted to mean that for those who choose the path of righteousness, God will increase them in it; and those who choose the path of sin, God will misguide them further (Abdalati 1981; Hamid 1989). Thus, while the Christian model holds that

people are born in a state of Original Sin, the Islamic model takes human nature as essentially good, and thus becoming Muslim does not entail an awakening from sin, but rather a return to goodness.

As scholars of religion know, it is wrong to assume that every member of a faith knows of and believes in all the doctrines and dogmas of that faith (Read and Eagle 2011), and therefore it would be unwise to assume that all the converts I interviewed would be aware of and actively reproducing the distinctions between Christian and Islamic understandings of human nature in their personal narratives. However, there are two caveats to this objection. First, these distinctions—such as Islam's denial of Original Sin—are arguably very basic, rudimentary teachings that converts would no doubt encounter early on. More importantly, these converts do not need to learn objective facts about the teachings of Islam to reproduce them within the return narrative—they need only be socialized into the social logic of their Muslim community to begin utilizing the cultural codes associated with Islam, in this case, the constellation of meanings, understandings, and assumptions about human nature. In other words, they do not need to learn specific terminology such as "fitra," but only to understand that Muslims characterize Islam as a "natural religion."

One final point of comparison. In his work on awakening stories, DeGloma (2010:529) writes, "'falsehood' is associated with the past and 'truth' is associated with the present and future." The return narrative differs in that the past is associated both with falsehood and with truth, depending on which specific past one refers to. While the immediate past (prior to conversion) may be one of falsehood, the distant past (at the time of birth) was one of truth.

Comparing the Return and Continuity Narratives

The return narrative also appears to have some similarities to the continuity narrative, yet again these dissolve upon closer inspection. For example, Johnston's (2013) participants spoke of having an *innate religiosity*, "a natural or innate inclination toward religious or spiritual expression . . . . a sense that there was something divine and an inner drive to find a way of connecting to it" (p. 559). This may seem reminiscent of the Islamic concept of fitra, which holds that all created beings are born into a natural (innate) state of submission to God. In both cases we find the idea that there is a natural inclination to believe in "something divine," yet it should be understood that Johnston's interviewees spoke of innate religiosity in a general sense, while when mine spoke of innate religiosity they made reference to specific elements of Islamic theology. Hence, the two narratives are more different than they are alike.

Johnston (2013:566) notes that the rhetoric of continuity (i.e., the continuity narrative) may be more commonly employed by members of "marked religious groups"—such as the Pagans she interviewed—or individuals holding otherwise marginalized identities. This suggests that we might expect most Muslim converts to tell continuity stories, as Muslims in the U.S. are perhaps the most scrutinized religious group (Cainkar 2011). Though the continuity narrative was popular among my interviewees, it was ultimately used by less than half of them. It would be worth investigating if those converts who felt more stigmatized in their religious identity were also more likely to employ continuity narratives, though I found no ancillary evidence to suggest that this might be the case, such as differences in religiosity or the self-presentation of their Muslim identity.

Just as the awakening narrative may be translated into one of return, so it is with the continuity story. As explained earlier, I observed some respondents using a paradoxical

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continuity narrative—in which they deny ever having believed in Christianity, yet also emphasize its proximity to Islam. The irony and confusion of this rhetorical maneuver is sublimated once translated into a return narrative, thereby reframing Christianity so that it is understood as a distortion of Islam. By doing so, those aspects of Christianity which diverge from Islamic teaching can be shunned, just as those aspects that the faiths share in common find approval as part of the original religion of Abraham, thus resolving the paradox.

One final distinction between these narratives must be explored. The return narrative is set apart by the fact that it offers a decidedly more deterministic model of conversion, whereas the others are agentic models. In awakening, one *acquires* agency, taking charge of their life by shedding falsehood and embracing truth. In continuity, one *recognizes* their agency by finding that they always had the truth inside them. By contrast, in returning, one *relinquishes* their agency to God and/or God's plan for them. Thus, in awakening and continuity stories, the individual chooses to convert, while in return stories the decision to be Muslim was essentially made by God at the moment of creation.

Finally, if all of these respondents converted to the same religion, then why do I find evidence of three distinct narrative structures being used to explain the conversions? We know that formula stories are widely-shared and oft-repeated narrative structures that allow us to organize the chaos of our lives into neatly coherent packages of shared understandings. DeGloma (2010; 2014) has argued that awakening stories are used to account changing one's political affiliation, for example, or moving from belief to disbelief or vice versa. These are major and significant personal and social changes, yet they are not entirely uncommon. However, conversion to Islam is a rare and novel event—falling beyond the pale of experience for most Americans—and there is no "right way" to tell that story. The social logic of our culture offers

no specific story for social actors to make sense of their converting to Islam. Therefore, Muslim converts like the ones I spoke to draw on various formula stories (e.g., awakenings, continuities, and returns) within which they can emplot their self-stories of converting.

Conclusion

This study of Muslim converts in the U.S. focuses on exploring the structure of conversion narratives. I asked interviewees to describe what was going on in their lives when they became Muslim, and they responded by organizing their experiences into narratives complete with characters, action, and plots (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Kirkman 2002), which distilled the subjectivity of their experiences into general narrative structures that were meaningful to the storyteller (Bruner 1990; Rambo 1999). The first group used awakening stories, underscoring the extent and completeness of their change from non-Muslim to Muslim. The second group used continuity stories, thereby stressing that they had never truly held the Christian beliefs that Islam finds distasteful, and to a lesser extent, had always held beliefs that Islam endorses. The third group used return stories, suggesting they had come back to or rediscovered a previously known truth.

Organizing their experiences as recognizable narratives, similar to formula stories, allowed these converts to make them credible and believable to their audience (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Loseke 2007), as well as affirming of their religious identities by signaling their belonging (Binklry 2007) to a particular religious community. Because narratives are often not told in a straightforward manner (Boje 2001) I have focused my attention on the more general story patterns that my interviewees invoked to "emplot" (Ricoeur 2010) their experiences of conversion. In order to do so, storytellers rely on perceived shared understandings between

themselves and their audience (Ricoeur 2010). These shared understandings are what I have

referred to throughout as cultural codes (DiMaggio 1997; Loseke 2007; 2012). For example,

some presented their pre-conversion self as a depressed or cynical "type" of person in contrast to

their newly enlightened self (e.g., awakening storytellers). Others presented their pre-conversion

self as a skeptical "type" of person (e.g., continuity storytellers). Still others presented

themselves as having been "seekers," people actively searching for a religious truth—a common

self-portrayal in the religious conversion scholarship (Stark and Finke 2000). In each case, the

interviewees are engaging in biographical reconstruction (Snow and Machalek 1984), a

reimagining or rearticulation of themselves and their lives in light of the social logic (Zuckerman

2005) of the thought community (Zerubavel 1996) to which they now belong. Furthermore, and

importantly, they were providing these accounts of their conversion to Islam to a fellow convert

who was also a researcher. As such, the stories they told could have contained different elements

had their perceived audience been different (Riessman 1989). Biographical reconstruction is not

unique to converts (Kirkman 2002), though it is especially notable in their lives due to the

"critical event" (Webster and Mertova 2007) of their conversion. It is this novelty of their

experience that makes their stories especially compelling to study.

These findings tell us something about social identity post conversion. Converting to any

religion one was not raised in is a significant change, perhaps even more significant when it is

among the most disapproved religions in the country (Lipka 2017; Pew 2017). Although

biographical reconstruction inhibits our ability to know what these converts were like prior to

their conversion, the self-stories they tell reveal a lot about how they wish to be perceived today.

I suggest that one objective of the stories they tell—and the specific narrative structures they

choose to emplot those stories in—can be understood as attempts at establishing an authentically

Muslim social identity for their audience. Leon Moosavi (2012:104) defines the authentic Muslim as one who is "genuine, sincere and legitimate in claiming to be a Muslim." To the extent that awakening, continuity, and return narratives express these traits—however the storyteller interprets or defines them—these narratives can be read as efforts to convey this authenticity to an audience.

For example, an awakening narrative places emphasis on the dramatic, transformative aspect of the conversion, signaling that it is a complete, holistic change, and thus indicative of having acquired a "genuine, sincere and legitimate" Muslim identity. The continuity narrative can likewise signal the authenticity of their social identity, but in a more nuanced fashion. A continuity narrative may be especially appropriate when a Muslim convert is relating their story to a Christian or Jewish audience and therefore wishes to accentuate commonalities both with the immediate audience and with the Judeo-Christian tradition more broadly, whereas the use of what I have called the paradoxical continuity narrative would be more appropriate when the audience is Muslim, as it emphasizes never having believed "wrongly." Finally, the return narrative, with its emphasis on "coming home," likewise expresses the authenticity of their religious identity, yet in a manner that does so by making positive reference to Islamic theology rather than negative reference to Christian theology. One weakness of this study is that each of these narratives weere used within the context of recorded, semi-structured interviews in which the audience was a fellow convert. Future research may seek to inquire as to if, when, and how these conversion narratives may differ for different audiences. Assuming that they do, it would be informative to know which story (of how and why they converted) they tell other Muslims, or to their family, and so on.

Notes

1 Take the oft-repeated love story: boy meets girl. The story itself is so common that it does not need repeating, yet is it the case that many people share this experience and therefore tell such similar stories, thereby accounting for our familiarity with the story, or is it the case that this story is so prevalent in our cultural ideas about romantic love that we take our own idiosyncratic experiences and arrange them into this recognizable and believable narrative when relating them to others or remembering them for ourselves? Proponents of narrative analysis favor the latter.

2 Cultural codes are subject to interpretation. The same cultural object can be coded differently by different groups of people, or depending on the context. The University of Wyoming became embroiled in a controversy over its school mascot, a cowboy (Zuckerman 2018). To many people, the cultural code of "cowboy" calls to mind images of a man wearing boots and a cowboy hat, perhaps riding a horse or otherwise working with animals. We may imagine his skin to be reddened by the sun, and his face creased by the hardships of life on a farm. He may be the strong, silent type in his character; pragmatic and traditionalist in his politics. Yet to a very vocal minority at the University of Wyoming, the "cowboy" cultural code represents the epitome of white supremacy and patriarchy. They feel that the image of a cowboy does not represent the identities or experiences of women, people of color, and international students at the school, and have urged the university to adopt a more inclusive school mascot. In much the same way, the cultural code of "Muslim" can and does mean very different things to different people. Muslim conversion narratives can therefore be read as a shift in the cultural code held by the convert. In other words, in order to convert to Islam, converts must come to think of the cultural code of "Muslim" in two important ways: first, as a person who has some kind of Truth, whether it be moral, intellectual, or spiritual, and second, as the type of person they want to be.

3 *Fox News* used a clever variation of the second formula story by reporting on the disparity between Muslim and Christian refugees from Syria. With a headline reading "gross injustice" (Shaw 2016), the article claimed that less than five percent of Syrian refugees are Christian, the "injustice" being that Muslim refugees were supposedly being favored over Christian ones. In this "sympathy" formula story, Syrian refugees are indeed deserving of our sympathy, so long as they are Christian, and shame on Obama for taking Muslims over Christians.

4 In *The Matrix* (1999), the protagonist, Neo, is offered a choice: "You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland and I show you how far down the rabbit hole goes."

5 In Islam, Abraham is considered a "muslim," as he willingly and obediently submitted to God, such as when he was ordered to sacrifice his own son and attempted to do so. Yet Abraham lived thousands of years before Muhammad and Islam as we know it today. Thus, although Abraham was not a Muslim (as we know them today), he was still a muslim (one who submits to God). The Qur'an makes several references to this, including:

Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to Allah, does good, and follows the way of Abraham the true in Faith? For Allah did take Abraham for a friend." [Qur'an 4:125]
Say: "Verily, my Lord hath guided me to a way that is straight,- a religion of right,- the path (trod) by Abraham the true in Faith, and he (certainly) joined not gods with Allah." [Qur'an 6:161]

6 Plenty of people believe that God has a "plan" for them, including converts to other religions. However, it should go without saying that *only Muslims believe that God's plan for them is to be Muslim.*

CHAPTER FOUR:

ABSTRACT

Social identity theory tells us that our identities are context specific—they gain or lose salience depending upon the situation and setting in which we find ourselves. In the context of largely immigrant Muslim communities in the U.S., most members are of Arab or South Asian descent. Yet converts to Islam in these communities reflect the predominant racial and ethnic categories of the U.S. (black, white, and Hispanic). The resulting incongruence foregrounds American converts' non-normative racial identities, making them highly visible within these communities. Using data from interviews with 39 American Muslim converts, I examine the implications of their racial and cultural identities for their "Muslimness"—their credibility and authenticity as Muslims—as they negotiate social networks and cultural scenes characterized by what they perceive as acquiescence to Arab-centric understandings of Islamic belief and practice. Findings suggest that black and white converts faced notably different experiences among heritage Muslim communities. Black converts found that they occupied a second-class status, whereas white converts experienced a duality of reverence and contestation in which they were "prized" for their whiteness, yet also faced many of the same barriers to authentic Muslimness as did black converts. Further, my data show that some converts believe their experiences—ranging from privilege to rejection—are shaped by the extent to which they conform to Arab-centric modes of religious expression. I argue that American converts' racial identities play a major role in preventing them from achieving authentic Muslim identities within the context of predominantly immigrant Muslim communities.

CHAPTER FOUR:

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND RELIGION

Previous research and scholarship suggests that when Westerners convert to Islam they sometimes feel they are not regarded as full and equal members of their adopted faith and religious communities (Wadud 2003; Galonnier and Rios 2015; McCloud 2003; Moosavi 2015b). This is not merely a consequence of their being relatively new to the faith, or having less knowledge about the religion than "heritage Muslims" (those born into Muslim families from predominately Muslim countries), although those factors may indeed play a role. The racial identity of these converts sets them apart from other Muslims, thus highlighting their difference from what a "Muslim" looks like. This racial-religious incongruence problematizes their "Muslimness," their credibility or authenticity as a Muslim. Conversely, heritage Muslims are regarded as authentically Muslim with little to no effort on their part. They enjoy a kind of *de facto* Muslimness independent of their levels of belief in or practice of Islam (Galonnier and Rios 2015; Jackson 2005; McCloud 2003; Wadud 2003). While converts to Islam from Western nations are rarely of Arab or South Asian ethnic background, immigrant Muslims to these nations often are, further ensconcing the image of "Muslim" as someone from the Middle East or South Asia and further reifying the racialization of Islam (Bayoumi 2006; Gotanda 2011; Joshi 2006; Husain 2017a; Meer 2013). This close association of all things Islamic with the people and cultures of the Middle East and South Asia is also prominent in many mosques in the U.S., where especially Arab-centric ways of understanding and practicing Islam are given preferential treatment (Beyette 2015; Jackson 2005; Wadud 2003).

The current study explores the relationship between Muslim convert racial identity and religious identity within the U.S. context. More specifically, it explores how the racial identities of American converts to Islam shape or otherwise influence their perceived authenticity as Muslims with a specific focus on their experiences with heritage Muslims in religious and cultural spaces in which converts are a minority. I carried out interviews with 39 American converts to Islam, and found notable differences between the experiences of black and white respondents. A number of these converts were Hispanic, yet rather than reporting unique encounters, they typically described similar experiences as found among either black or white interviewees. Further, I found that those converts who adopted "Islamic" style clothing, and/or displayed a proficiency in the Arabic language or the Qur'an, were more likely to be perceived as authentically Muslim by the heritage Muslims with whom they interacted, though this was not always the case.

Muslimness and Arab Conformity

"...there is no racism in Islam but there is plenty among Muslims, and ethnicity is a priority when it comes to who is really Muslim" (Aminah McCloud, as cited in Hadad and Esposito 2000:38).

Within the context of this study, I define *heritage Muslims* as Muslim immigrants, and the children or grandchildren of Muslim immigrants, as well as Muslims in the U.S. temporarily, such as students or those visiting family. This does not include converts or the children (or grandchildren) of converts. By *American Muslim converts* I refer to U.S. citizens of any race or ethnicity, who were born into non-Muslim families, but have since chosen Islam as their religion. The key distinction here is racial and cultural heritage, not U.S. citizenship—which was shared

by everyone in my sample. Indeed, a full two-thirds of immigrant Muslims in the U.S. are naturalized citizens (Pew 2017). Nearly one fifth of U.S. Muslims are second or third generation children of immigrants (Pew 2017) and as such are typically culturally assimilated. This marks them as different than their immigrant parents, yet the second generation still retain a connection, however tenuous or symbolic it may be, to a traditionally Muslim country and culture—something that converts do not have. Further, although there is clearly considerable difference *within* these two categories (heritage and convert), my findings suggest that—at least in matters of identity—the differences *between* them are considerably more significant. As my analysis will make clear, delineating between heritage and convert Muslims is a necessary result of foregrounding race in the conversation about Muslim authenticity.

Prior scholarship has defined "Muslimness" as "the essential qualities presumed to be shared by Muslims" (Selby 2016:73), and "the quality that authentic Muslims are supposed to possess" (Moosavi 2012:104). I will argue *Muslimness* should be defined as a racialized social construct that, in practice, is regarded as an essential quality that makes one authentically Muslim. I provide two rationales for this argument: first, within Muslim communities, there is understood to be a sometimes tacit, sometimes overt preference for heritage Muslim—especially Arab—modalities of interpreting and practicing Islam, and second, the American public's tendency to collapse the many different racial and ethnic groups comprising the broader U.S. Muslim population into a racialized, essentialized "Muslim" category. The racialization of Muslims also occurs within broader social structures and institutions (Byng 2012), but here I limit my discussion to these more cultural aspects.

In the first case, heritage Muslims treat their idiosyncratic incarnations of Islam as a kind of "ontological universal," mistaking the particular for the general (Jackson 2005). These

understandings of what it means to be Muslim take on specifically racial and ethnic dimensions when moved out of their original cultural context and into a new one, in this case the United States. Here, a *de facto* authentic Muslim identity is "unconditionally granted to Muslim immigrants" (Wadud 2003:280), but not extended to the convert population, who almost never share the racial or cultural heritage within which these particular incarnations of Islam arose. Hence, a large part of my analysis rests on firmly delineating converts from those born into Muslim families, the latter having the "right" familial, cultural, geographic, traditional, and racial or ethnic background to lend authenticity to their Muslim identities. It is necessary to stress the racial and cultural aspects of these identities because they work together to mark these converts as decidedly different from the majority of heritage Muslims in the U.S. According to a Pew survey of Muslim Americans (Pew 2017), 58% of U.S. Muslims are immigrants; and of that total, 35% are South Asian while another 36% are Middle Eastern (including 11% from Iran).

Muslim Americans are perhaps the most racially and ethnically diverse religious population in the United States (Pew 2017). Yet just as multiracial Christian congregations have a tendency to reproduce Euro-centric forms of worship and cultural norms—what Kori Edwards (2008) refers to as "Anglo-conformity"—there is evidence that American mosques reproduce Arab-centric interpretations and cultural manifestations of Islam (Beyyette 2015). Within heritage Muslim communities, Arab Muslims regard their expression of Islam as more authentic than those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Beyyette 2015). Being Arab gives one a "presumed mastery" (Jackson 2005:4) of the faith, and through that a perceived authority to speak on matters of Islam. This authority is rooted in their Arabness, such as their intimacy with the Arabic language, in which the Qur'an and other major Islamic texts are written. This perceived authority is also formed "on the basis of their centuries-long heritage of Islam"

(Wadud 2003:272). The tendency of heritage Muslims to view Arab culture as a "proxy for Islamic authenticity" (Khan 2015) has been referred to as the "Arabization" of Islam (Ghoshal 2007), and "Arab privilege" (Iqbal 2016). To the extent that Muslim communities recognize "Arab privilege," they may be said to be characterized by what I call "Arab conformity." I define *Arab conformity* as an ethnoreligious hierarchy which places Arabs and Arab-centric understandings and practices of Islam at the top, while discouraging or devaluing other expressions of Muslimness.

In the second case, I argue that "Muslimness" is a racialized social construct because there is evidence that Americans simply perceive Muslims as a uniform ethnoracial category or group. Many people regard "Muslim" and "Arab" as being interchangeable (McCloud 2003). Islam is itself a racialized religion (Bayoumi 2006; Gotanda 2011; Husain 2017a; Meer 2013), sometimes referred to as an ethnic religion (Hammond and Warner 1993), in that it is primarily associated with a particular racial or ethnic group, in this case people of Arab descent. Further complicating matters, Arabs are not always distinguished from other heritage Muslims, just as Arab Christians are not always distinguished from Arab Muslims (Zopf 2018). Gerardo Marti (2016) has written about this conflation of Arabs and South Asians in the case of Sameer—a man of Pakistani descent who converted to Christianity and is now the pastor of an Evangelical church in the United States. Sameer comes from a Muslim family and grew up in the Middle East. Marti (2016) argues that because of this, Sameer's congregation perceive him as having the authority to speak on issues regarding the religions and history of the Middle East. Although he grew up in Kuwait and speaks Arabic, Sameer is actually South Asian, not Arab, yet his American congregation does not seem to understand or even care about the difference. Sameer has what may be called the *ethnoreligious capital* of someone from the Middle East, which may

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be understood as the racial and ethnic elements granting authenticity to a racialized religious identity. In Sameer's case—and in the case of most heritage Muslims in the U.S.—this is an embodied capital. Specifically, Sameer has the nationality (Kuwaiti), ethnic heritage (Pakistani), skin tone (brown), name (Arab sounding), and language (Arabic) that afford him a perceived credibility or authenticity regarding matters relating to Islam and the Middle East. Though Sameer "was Muslim, now Christian" he still retains his ethnoreligious capital because it is embodied through his proximity to Arabness. Therefore, Arab Muslims (and to a lesser extent, South Asian Muslims) may be said to have an "air of authenticity" that stands in stark contrast to Western born converts who do not share their racial and cultural heritage.

In this section I have argued that Muslimness should be defined as a racialized social construct that, in practice, is regarded as an essential quality that makes one authentically Muslim. Further, Muslimness is informed by two components: [1] the phenomena of "Arab privilege" and Arab conformity in heritage Muslim communities, and [2] the American publics' conflation of what should be distinct religious, racial, and ethnic categorical identities (e.g., Muslim, Arab, South Asian) into a generalized, essentialized, and racialized category of "Muslim." In the next section I examine the implications this has for Americans who convert to Islam.

American Converts and Heritage Muslims

"The fact is that most indigenous Muslims feel unwelcome at immigrant mosques and at immigrant celebrations" (McCloud 2003:173).

Scholarship specifically focused on Latino/a and Hispanic Muslims is sparse (see Bowen 2010; 2013), and there are virtually no empirical studies. As such, this review is focused on

black and white American converts. Black Americans comprise approximately one-third of Muslim Americans (Pew 2017) yet are rarely taken into consideration in much of the social science research on this religious group. Nonetheless, they have a long-standing and complicated relationship with Islam in the U.S., beginning long before the post-1965 wave of immigration (Chande 2008; Curtis 2002; Dannin 2002; McCloud 2003). Scholars such as McCloud (2003:161) have noted that black Americans were "drawn to a 'color-blind' Islam that transcends ethnicity and culture," yet their experiences with heritage Muslims have, at times, been mired in the complications of racial and ethnic animosities, producing what Wadud (2003:270) has called "profound unreconciled differences across ethnic and racial backgrounds." Some black American Muslims feel that they are simply overlooked within the American Muslim community (Jackson 2005), while others believe that their home-grown Islam is de-valued by heritage Muslims who favor their own transplanted "ethnic version[s]" as 'true Islam'" (McCloud 2003:172). Still others have been dismayed to find anti-black racism within heritage Muslim communities, especially among first generation immigrants (Karim 2006).

White Americans are relative newcomers to the faith, though a growing body of research has begun to examine their experiences (Anway 1996; Bowen 2015), sometimes especially through the lens of race theory (Galonnier 2015; Galonnier and Rios 2015; Husain 2017b). An ethnographic study by Galonnier and Rios (2015) provides a vantage point from which to observe the experiences of white American Muslim converts. The first author attended Islam 101 style classes hosted by an American Islamic organization located in a Midwestern city. The organization specifically caters to converts and lapsed Muslims, offering classes on the Qur'an, spirituality, and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The bulk of the classes were "aimed at teaching converts strong fundamentals about Islam as well as offering a safe space in which they

could share their struggles and discuss lifestyle issues" (Galonnier and Rios 2015:65). This work draws attention to the supposed incompatibility of white converts' racial and religious identities as they navigated the Muslim community they had joined.

> They sometimes felt treated like small children or despised as *inauthentic and un-genuine*. More importantly, because Islam as a religion has been racialized, those who did not fit the stereotypical expectations of what "a Muslim looks like" felt they needed to go the extra mile to signal their belonging and demonstrate the authenticity of their conversion. The white American converts, in particular, did not fit into most people's mental frames (both Muslim and non-Muslim) who instead considered Islam to be a nonwhite religion. . . .This incredulity and, at times, suspicion, jeopardized their attempts at becoming full-fledged members of the community (p. 70-71).

The authors found that white converts felt they were regarded as "inauthentic and ungenuine." In other words, they believed that heritage Muslims perceived them as not having enough Muslimness to be regarded as equal member of the community. This lack of a sense of belonging felt by these white converts echoes the sentiments of black converts (McCloud 2003).

Scholarship on white and black Americans who have converted to Islam suggests that their racial identities are made highly salient within heritage Muslim social networks and cultural spaces. This occurs because "the implicit racial meaning in Muslimness is non-whiteness/non-blackness, and the implicit religious meaning in American whiteness and blackness is non-Muslim" (Husain 2017b:10). In light of this, the current study asks a series of interrelated questions: In what ways do American converts' racial identities shape their interactions with

heritage Muslims? How does this affect their Muslimness? And does conforming to Arab-centric forms of Islam allow converts to acquire more Muslimness?

Methods

Answering these research questions requires data in which American Muslim converts speak about, reflect on, and interpret their interactions with heritage Muslims, preferably in the form of illustrative narratives that "show" more than "tell." I conducted in-depth interviews with Americans who had converted to Islam, asking them how they felt they had been perceived and treated by heritage Muslims since converting. I needed these stories to come from a diverse array of Muslim converts, especially ethnically and racially diverse, to allow for comparisons. As a small and widely dispersed population, American Muslim converts are difficult to adequately sample. Multiple-strand snowball sampling was employed over a 15-month period, from September 2016 to December 2017, in which I collected 39 interviews. Altogether I interviewed 25 women and 14 men. Fourteen of my interviewees were white women, making them overrepresented among my sample. Although by some estimates white American converts are "overwhelmingly female" (Wadud 2003:277), recent data from Pew (2017) provide little insight into the veracity of this claim. Nine of the women that I interviewed (seven white and two black) became Muslim after beginning a romantic relationship with a heritage Muslim.

The data for this paper came from six questions which can be found in the Appendix. At times, follow-up questions were used to probe further, garner specific details, establish chronology, or to elicit respondents' interpretation of events. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and each interviewee was given a pseudonym that reflected whether or not they had adopted "Islamic" names. For example, "Tony" uses the name his parents gave him, whereas

"Aysha" changed her name after converting. These interviews were then submitted to deductive analysis. I knew what kind of information I was looking for—examples of race playing a role in shaping their positive and negative interactions—but I also scoured the transcripts for other possible interpretations, such as the convert holding religious or political views which heritage Muslims may disapprove of and therefore compromise the convert's Muslimness independent of race. I found scant evidence that this was the case.

I approached this research both as a researcher and as a Muslim convert. I made it clear to each interviewee that I was also a convert, and divulged personal information regarding my own conversion and experiences if the respondent inquired or showed an interest, as many did. This enabled me to develop rapport with my respondents, the vast majority of whom I had never met before. I personally knew only three of them before interviewing began, and a few more I had met only in passing. My positionality as both an outsider (a virtual stranger to most respondents) and an insider (as a fellow convert) provided me a unique vantage point from which to conduct the interviews. In some regards, I think the stories collected here could not have been collected by someone not occupying a similar social identity as an American convert. For example, in many instances, my interviewees seemed to relish the opportunity to talk about some of the frustrating things they had experienced among heritage Muslims, knowing, or at least assuming, that I would understand and relate to their feelings—and I was sure to make my empathy known. Some of the stories shared, and the details included, likely would not have been recounted to a heritage Muslim, perhaps especially first-generation immigrants. Further, my interviewees may have likewise been tight-lipped around non-Muslim Americans who they may perceive as unknowledgeable about the faith or unsympathetic to the concerns of Muslims more generally, much less to the problems faced by converts. That being said, as a white man I differed from

most of my sample in regards to gender (64% women) and race/ethnicity (56% black, Hispanic, or mixed race), and also age, as most of my sample were either 10-20 years younger than me, or 20-30 years older. This also represented a split in my sample, as some had converted only a few months or years before the interview, while others had been Muslim for over 40 years.

As stated, my intention was to inquire as to how their racial identity may affect, shape, or otherwise influence the authenticity of their religious identity. However, I did not ask my respondents any questions about race or ethnicity because I wanted to see if they would raise the topic of race and ethnicity themselves without any solicitation or prompting. By not inquiring directly about race or ethnicity, my interview method avoids the problems associated with leading or "priming" interview questions. Had I asked my respondents about situations in which their race and/or ethnicity had resulted in positive or negative treatment from heritage Muslims, the mentioning of race in those responses could be dismissed as contingent upon my having asked about it specifically. Conversely, by not mentioning the words race or ethnicity in any questions on the interview schedule, it was left to respondents to introduce race—or not—into the conversation themselves. The fact that so many did, unprompted, is testament to the power they perceive it to have in shaping their experiences with heritage Muslims.

Positive or negative, these interactions and experiences took place in a variety of locales—especially at a large, multiethnic mosque in central Florida which was founded by Arab immigrants in the 1970s. To this day, community members from predominantly Arabic speaking countries occupy religious and administrative leadership positions within the mosque (Mahmood 2016). In some cases the vignettes presented in the following sections are from experiences that took place at this mosque, or at one of the two private Islamic schools in the area. My interviewees also spoke of incidents that took place at smaller, more monoethnic mosques in the

same city, at other Muslims' homes, and with Muslim Student Associations at their universities. Sometimes my interviewees were deliberately vague about exactly where their interactions had taken place—especially if they were negative. This vagueness was even more common when it came to questions of with whom specifically they were interacting, again, especially when the experiences were negative. As a result, I often could not separate heritage Muslims by country of origin or parental descent because my interviewees declined to reveal those specifics. Some would tell me they did not know for sure where the person in question was from, or that they felt like they were gossiping in giving those kinds of details.[1]

Overall, about half of my respondents reported that they have had very positive and welcoming experiences with heritage Muslims, though many mentioned that this was more of a "honeymoon phase" immediately following their conversion rather than an ongoing occurrence. In general, these converts felt that they were genuinely valued within the community, and at times even revered. Several white interviewees said they had initially been treated as "special" or "chosen," as having been guided to the Truth. It may be worth noting that such affirmations are self-serving, complimenting the convert while simultaneously reassuring heritage Muslims in their own faith through the fact that others are converting. However, roughly half of my respondents had much less positive things to say about their experiences with heritage Muslims. Many people told me they felt like outsiders within the community—novelties at best—but never truly accepted as 'real' Muslims. The following sections examine the ways in which race shaped their experiences.

Black Exclusion

"They don't look at you as a real Muslim." — Hasan

The key question to be explored in this analysis is how converts to Islam perceive their racial identities as influencing the authenticity of their religious identity—in particular, the challenges and affirmations to their Muslimness that converts receive from heritage Muslims. The most direct and humiliating challenges were recounted by black respondents. Of the fifteen black (9) and black Hispanic (6) converts I spoke with, many told me that they faced the same racism from some heritage Muslims as they did from some white Americans—racism that not only challenged their status as Muslims, but sometimes as human beings as well.

The sentiment that heritage Muslims—especially first-generation immigrants—harbored racially prejudiced views toward black Americans was prevalent among many of my black interviewees—some even telling me that I should have been asking questions about racism. Rifa, a 65-year-old graduate student, put it plainly: "the older generation are racist…[they] come to this country already looking down on us as a people." When asked if she had ever experienced such racism, Rifa told me a story of once getting screamed at by a heritage Muslim woman for "wasting food."

> I was at the masjid during the month of Ramadan and my granddaughter went
> with me. You know how the brothers fix everybody's plate, and there were these
> plates sitting there with all this food. And you know during Ramadan you're
> fasting and your stomach shrinks and you really can't eat all that food. So, some
> people had gotten up and left, and they left the plates sitting there on the floor in
> the room where the sisters were. So when I got ready to go—I just wanted to
> help—so I just started taking those plates 'cause I didn't think anybody was

gonna eat what was left on those plates. So I began putting those plates in the
trash, and the sister, *she yelled at me and screamed at me and talked very rude to
me* about wasting food, and my granddaughter was there and it was demeaning.
The way she treated me—it really upset my daughter so much that *she never
wanted to go back to the masjid.* So, it was really disappointing to me because my
daughter had decided to fast for Ramadan, and she was trying to cover up [wear
hijab], and she was so hurt to see her mother disrespected like that in front of all
the sisters that she didn't want to come back to the masjid. She never went back to
that masjid again.

Consider also Vanessa, a 29-year-old marketing coordinator, who was deeply cognizant of the
myriad ways race has shaped her life experiences before and after converting. She believes that
Islam was the religion of her African ancestors, and by converting she was reclaiming an identity
and heritage that was stolen from her. Speaking a year and a half since her conversion, Vanessa
had found that she was not fully accepted by heritage Muslims, especially those of Arab descent.
She recounted a story from a few months prior in which she found her identity as a Muslim
challenged,

Last Ramadan I went to the mosque and prayed. A little girl came up to me and
asked "Are you a Muslim?" This was right after I prayed and I was like "Yes..."
Then she went back to tell her mom who was in *niqab* [face veil], and I was very
offended because it had been a year since I became Muslim, plenty of people had
seen me pray. If I'm in the mosque, and I'm covered, and I'm doing the prayer—
why would you even ask me if I'm a Muslim? What would I be? I just felt very
offended that that happened.

From Vanessa's perspective, the fact that she was praying in a mosque—clad in a hijab—should have effectively signaled her religious identity as a Muslim, yet somehow she was still met with a question implying it did not. She believes that she was challenged in this way because she does not look the way heritage Muslims expect a Muslim to look. There may be more contributing to this situation than just Vanessa's racial identity, such as her being perceived as a relative newcomer at the large, multiethnic mosque where this took place. The mosque in question was frequented by a number of my respondents. It was founded approximately 40 years before the time of our interview and although its membership was racially and ethnically diverse—with conversions a regular occurrence after Friday congregational prayers—mosque leadership was predominately Arab (Mahmood 2016). Ultimately, we cannot know for sure whether Vanessa's Muslimness was challenged because of her race; but nonetheless, she *believed* it was.

In most cases, the racism experienced by black American converts was more blatant than the two previous examples. An example of overt anti-black racism comes from Aysha, a 65-year-old retired teacher, who told me, "When I became Muslim, I was happy to be Muslim, but when I began to integrate with Muslims from other countries they weren't receptive to me—my children either." Like Vanessa, Aysha was deeply cognizant of how race has impacted her life, and in her 46 years as a Muslim had faced many instances in which herself, her children, and her grandchildren had encountered what she identified as the racial animus of heritage Muslims. She went on to call heritage Muslims "the most prejudiced people that I've ever experienced in my life. . . . I've had the most negative experiences with Pakistanis and Arabs. Especially Arabs, more so than anybody." I asked her for an example of how the prejudice of heritage Muslims had made her feel like she did not belong. Aysha provided multiple examples, mostly centered on the treatment of her children. For example, her son would join basketball games at the mosque, "and

boys get into little differences of opinion, and some of the little Arab boys would call my son the N word." In another example here, Aysha was working a side job as a housekeeper for an Arab woman.

> She had a friend come to her house and I was in the kitchen helping her with some food and we were all eating, she would allow us to eat first and then I would go and do other things she wanted me to do. She told me to get up really quick and go into the bedroom and close the door and don't say anything, and I took my daughter with me. She said, "Don't say anything… here comes my friend!" So I had to stay in the bedroom for like thirty to forty minutes, and then afterward she knocked on the door and told me to come out. She said her friend—and she was an elderly woman—she said her friend was very, very prejudiced and she didn't believe that African Americans can sit down with an Arab and eat from the same table spread. So she didn't want her to say anything to hurt my feelings, so she had me go in that room and stay there.

Not only was Aysha confronted by the blatant racism of the older woman, but also the acquiescence to that racism of the younger. The fact that Aysha's employer wanted to "protect" her feelings could be read as admirable behavior, or a testament to how little she thought of her. Aysha was one of seven black respondents who had converted before 1980, and all had tales of racist encounters. Many of them made it a point to inform me, their white interviewer, that racism was very much a part of their experience as Muslims.

Halfway through my interview with Kareem, a 67-year-old teacher, he told me, "I'm gonna share something with you that I think maybe you should know—there's racism in Muslims. There's no racism in Islam, but there's racism within the Muslim." Kareem had

experienced this racism on numerous occasions, often in the form of challenges to his Muslimness, such as the time he was pointedly asked by a heritage Muslim, "Do you think you're part of this community?" Even with decades of living as a Muslim under his belt, and even with his teaching a weekly class at a predominantly Arab mosque, and even with his having worked as a teacher at an Islamic school for years, Kareem still found his Muslimness challenged. He recounted a story of having delivered a *khutbah* [sermon] and leading the *salat-ul-Jumah* [Friday congregational prayer] at a mid-sized, monoethnic mosque in another city:

> So we finished the prayer, I had given the khutbah. We finished the prayer, Jumah was over. A man stood up and said, "We have to pray again!" So some people say "No, we don't have to pray again, the *imam* did it fine." He said, "We didn't hear him say *bismillah* when he started *al Fatiha*." . . . . [The story continues with a technical discussion of whether or not it is necessary to utter "In the name of God" before beginning the prayer.] . . . . So why was he challenging me? Was it the skin I was in? Was it I didn't sound like them when I recited? I have my own tone... but nevertheless—the challenge.

> **And how long ago was this?**

> Oh, this was... maybe about six years ago.

This incident took place when Kareem was 61-years-old and had been living as a Muslim for approximately 44 years. The heritage Muslim issuing the challenge suggested that Kareem's omission of the Arabic phrase *bismillah* [in the name of God] had disqualified the prayer and that it needed to be performed again. Ironically, the very fact that Kareem had been called upon to give a sermon and lead the congregational prayer was a testament to the respect they must have felt toward him and his knowledge of the faith. Yet despite this he was still met with an

unconventional challenge to his ability to properly recite *al Fatiha*, the first seven verses of the

Qur'an, and the most basic and fundamental of Islamic prayers. To put this challenge in context

it is worth noting that *al Fatiha* is recited at least seventeen times a day by Muslims who perform

the five daily prayers (Abdalati 1998; Büyükçelebi 2003), of which Kareem is one. After his 44

years as a Muslim, it is entirely possible that he would have recited these verses approximately

270,000 times in his life.

Another striking example of this tendency to discredit or devalue black converts'

understanding and practice of the faith came from Clive, a 27-year-old black man of Jamaican

descent. Clive grew up in Florida but now lives in Egypt where he works translating *fatawa*,

[Islamic juridical rulings] from Arabic to English. Clive believes that in Muslim countries

"There's a lot of very blatant racism," and therefore immigrant heritage Muslims come to the

U.S. with prejudicial attitudes toward black people. He told me, "In countries such as Pakistan,

Palestine, Syria, there is an understanding, unfortunately, that a person who comes from the

African continent isn't really as smart as other individuals." When asked if this type of thinking

had affected him, he told a story of having been invited to deliver a sermon at a mosque in

Florida, only to be met with confusion once he arrived.

> I was there to give the Friday sermon, and they were running around trying to find
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> who's the *imam* [prayer leader]? Who's giving the sermon today? I come in and
>
> I'm like, "What time does the sermon start?" And they're like, "In five minutes
>
> but we can't find the imam!" And I'm like, "Okay, I'm here to give the *khutba*
>
> [sermon]." And they're just like, "What do you mean? Huh? You?" And I'm like,
>
> "Yeah," and I go to the front and sit there waiting and I hear the guys speaking
>
> behind me in Arabic: "I think this is the guy who is supposed to give the khutba,"

and the guy next to him is like, "Yeah, but can he even give a khutba? Does he

even speak Arabic? Does he know anything about Qur'an?" And I'm listening to

this as they are speaking in Arabic—speaking about me, thinking I don't

understand—but that is, unfortunately, how a lot of the immigrant community

see."

As with Kareem, we see the strange irony of Clive having been invited to deliver a sermon and

lead a congregational prayer, yet also being met with incredulity from some heritage Muslims in

the community at their ability to do so. One possible explanation is that these heritage Muslims

may be concerned that Kareem or Clive are following a non-traditional form of the religion, such

as the Nation of Islam (NOI). However, none of the converts I interviewed identified with NOI,

though some had in decades past. Further, according to Pew (2017) only about 3% of black

Muslim Americans identify as members of the NOI, and those that do would arguably be more

likely to frequent NOI mosques rather than the sunni mosques that Kareem and Clive attend.

Therefore, it is hard to dismiss the prejudice and exclusion they faced as simply the product of

theological differences between themselves and heritage Muslims, though the possibility of

perceived differences cannot be ruled out entirely.

Further, though not every black Muslim I interviewed told me they believed heritage

Muslims harbored prejudicial attitudes toward black Americans, all of the respondents presented

above did. This belief was not always stated explicitly in the vignettes I have chosen to include,

but was made clear to me at one point or another during the interviews. Yet beyond these lived

experiences, the claims of racism made by the above respondents are supported by research on

new immigrant groups suggesting that they sometimes participate in anti-black racism. For

example, Dhingra's (2003) work on second-generation Korean and Indian immigrants found

them employing common negative stereotypes about blacks, such as that they "lack the cultural drive to work hard in school," are "lazy," yet also "genetically structured to go to sports" (Dhingra 2003:129). By invoking the cultural and biological racism of these stereotypes, Dhingra's interviewees distanced themselves from black Americans and asserted their own moral superiority. Given the testimonies of many of the black converts interviewed for this study, this phenomenon appears to be playing out in heritage Muslim communities as well.

The challenges to their Muslimness that black converts reported are underscored by the fact that a number of them, young as well as old, found Islam attractive, at least in part, because they understood it to be free of the racism they felt was embedded within American culture, only to be dismayed when they encountered it from heritage Muslims as well. Janet, a 56-year-old elementary teacher, recounted her disappointment in heritage Muslims not living up to the egalitarian ideals of Islam:

> When I became Muslim I read that the Prophet says, "No Arab is better than a
> non-Arab, and a white man is not better than a black man," and I was like "Oh,
> wow, ok, *alhamdulillah*!" [Thanks be to God]. I was so happy to see this. When
> you become Muslim, some of those Muslims are more racist than you would like
> to think. I'm like, what? I become Muslim and this is what I have to deal with
> again! Here we go again?! I feel like we have a big problem with that.

Janet was dispirited at what she felt was racism among heritage Muslims, made worse by the fact that "no one wants to talk about it." The fact that heritage Muslims did not even bother to follow quintessential teachings of Islam—such as the one she quoted above from Muhammad's famous Final Sermon[2]—yet still retained their authority as "real Muslims," exemplifies the embodied

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nature of Muslimness. It is not a quality of those diligently practicing the faith, but rather it is something intrinsic, hereditary even, and therefore unattainable to converts.

Consider Bridget and Yakub, a married couple who also happen to be the only Shia Muslims[3] I interviewed. Yakub is black Hispanic and Bridget is white. They attend a Shia mosque that is home to, according to Yakub, "a good handful of Syrian and Iraqi refugees there, and Afghani . . . .We have races of all kinds that come there." Thus, though theologically different than the Sunni mosques that most interviewees reported attending (except those few that said they never go to mosques), this Shia mosque was similar in that it was comprised predominately of heritage Muslims.

Yakub is 36-years-old and black Hispanic. He works as a fourth-grade teacher and is not technically a convert. His father is from Jamaica and his mother is from Panama, and both converted to Islam before he was born. They raised him Sunni, but he became interested in Shia Islam while in college and "converted" soon after. Yakub's experience is better described as "religious switching," that is, changing denominations within a religion. However, despite having been raised by two Muslim converts, Yakub was made to feel like an outsider. He told me that heritage Muslims "have this idea [that] we've come to their religion." He continued:

Sometimes you feel like you are fighting to be American with Muslims, especially Muslims that are very one-track minded as far as race and things like that. But then you feel the same thing here as far as things like race. Especially with myself, I'm in the middle, all my co-workers are white women, and my wife is a white woman, so there's a lot of things they don't necessarily relate to when it comes to Islam or even race. And then at the mosque you have people who are Pakistani, Arab—and slavery, honestly, started from Arabs. So they have this idea

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that American blacks, that we're supposed to be doing something for them—

we've come to their religion. So you have that clash with the Muslim/American

all the time.

Yakub's identity as simultaneously American and Muslim is troubled by what he believed was a pervasive racism in heritage Muslim communities, which he equated to the racism he experienced as a middle-aged black man in modern America. A self-described "history buff," he drew a direct line from the practice of slavery in predominantly Arab countries to the attitudes of Arabs in the United States today. His experiences stand in stark contrast to those of his wife, Bridget, a 30-year-old white woman from Philadelphia, who repeatedly stated that she was a "token white" in their religious community.

In the Muslim community, like Arabs and Pakistanis, white people are kind of

revered—they want white people. At the private school that I worked at, I called

myself the token white person, because they loved the fact that I was a white

American. . . . One of the administrators wouldn't even shake his hand [her

husband]. With me he'd always greet me, "Oh, hello sister Bridget," but he

wouldn't greet my husband.

Bridget is a special ED teacher and Muslim of eight years. She met Yakub at a private Islamic school where they both worked. Even before converting, Bridget felt that she was held in higher regard than Yakub. As with some of the other white converts, this special treatment was a double-edged sword, as Bridget found that her race made her a novelty and de-legitimized her all the same.

But for me being a white Muslim, even in the Muslim community, I get a lot of,

one: that I need to be nurtured and taken care of [laughs], [*sarcastically*]: "I don't

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know anything." I mean, I've been Muslim for seven or eight years now! . . . The

identity that Muslims have with their own—if they're Pakistani, Syrian, wherever

they're from—that identity, that nationality is so strong within them. So even

though there is the "great white hope," at the same time, I don't matter. I am

inconsequential to what Islam is, their intention of what Islam is going to be

about.

Thus, for black converts to Islam, the racism they would at times face within largely heritage

Muslim communities was the same as the racism they faced before converting. However, for

white converts the salience of their racial identity was often a new phenomenon. Individuals who

spent much of their lives not thinking of themselves as "raced" found themselves precariously

poised in a racial hierarchy that revered them as the "right kind" of convert, yet also contested

their authenticity as full-fledged Muslims in a phenomenon I refer to as "white duality."

White Duality

White duality describes a situation or context in which whiteness confers both privilege

and disadvantage. In the case of white converts to Islam embedded in heritage Muslim

communities, their whiteness results in them being held in high regard, but also works to their

disadvantage because of the incongruence between their racial and religious identities. At times,

whiteness even incurs suspicion and mistrust. Within heritage Muslim-centric spaces such as

mosques, whiteness can be an advantage and a liability.

Overall, my white respondents provided accounts of mostly positive experiences with

other Muslims. Of the twenty-two white (17) and Hispanic white (5) converts I interviewed,

seven brought race into the conversation to account for their experiences. These converts

recognized that their whiteness could privilege them, but they also felt that being white could sometimes work against them. Other respondents would at times describe racialized encounters using race-neutral language. Since the method of interviewing dictated that I not inquire about race, I refrained from doing so. Thus, any mention of race as a mediating factor in their experiences was introduced by them. Readers may wish to keep in mind that these white respondents were being interviewed by another white convert, which may have encouraged them [and people of color] to not invoke race.[4]

A few seemed to enjoy the special attention they received as white converts. For example, June, a 56-year-old homemaker, told me that heritage Muslims "are protective of converts, we're their babies." But many more disliked what they felt was superficial treatment. Laylana, a 29-year-old working for a Muslim legal advocacy group, felt that white converts were treated "like souvenirs—they show us off but don't want to know our experiences." Lucas, a 30-year-old life coach, felt that white converts were regarded as "prized tropical birds," and that their conversion was a kind of "validation" for heritage Muslims. Melanie, a 26-year-old research associate, was a member of a very welcoming Muslim community located on the campus of the Ivy League university from which she graduated. Most of the members of this community are second-generation and international students of South Asian descent, and Melanie was considering marriage with a man of Pakistani descent. She prefers this community to others because of bad experiences she has had at predominantly Arab mosques, such as the time she was invited to one by a heritage Muslim woman she barely knew. When Melanie arrived, this woman proceeded to show her off like a trophy. Regardless of how welcoming her current community may be, Melanie was aware that her race marks her as different than most, "Even when I'm 75 they will see my skin and eyes and know I'm a convert." Her friend Alexa

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shared a similar sentiment, "Even though I'm a convert I'm not as Muslim as the people who are born Muslim." Alexa, a 22-year-old graduate student, was completing a Master's degree in Middle Eastern studies, with a specialization in *fiqh*—the interpretation of Islamic Law. She had traveled to Morocco—where she met her fiancée—before converting, and speaks Arabic reasonably well. Yet despite her scholarly pedigree, Alexa routinely faces mundane challenges to her Muslimness in the form of benign slights, "While I might be studying *fiqh*, they ask me if I know how to pray." By analogy, this is akin to asking a classically trained pianist if they can read sheet music. As a convert, and a recent one, Alexa finds herself categorized as a "know nothing," while ironically she likely knows far more about the history and technicalities of Islamic Law than most heritage Muslims. One may speculate that these challenges are tied less to her race and more to the fact that she is a newcomer to the faith. Alexa sees it as a combination of the two.

> I think, personally, I'm just so white that not just anyone believes I'm Muslim
> when I say it—there's already that misunderstanding and disbelief because I'm a
> white woman and the conversion has been relatively recent. Most people don't
> think I'm one hundred percent Muslim. I used to be a heavy drinker and do a lot
> of things that would not be accepted in Muslim circles. I dress more modestly
> [now], but because I still look the same, people don't tend to believe it. I honestly
> think it would be a different story if I threw on a headscarf. I think it also has to
> do with wearing hijab. When I do wear hijab I'm often mistaken for Lebanese or
> Palestinian, so I get fewer questions then.

Alexa spoke of her whiteness marking her as not "one hundred percent Muslim." She also described how her behavioral changes after converting, such as no longer being a "heavy drinker," do not seem to influence heritage Muslims' perception of her religious identity as

profoundly as does putting on a headscarf. Although Alexa felt that her status as a relative

newcomer to the faith played a role in her not being taken seriously as a Muslim, this was also

the case for older white converts as well. Carol, a 57-year-old woman who teaches at an

elementary school and has lived as a Muslim since marrying a man from Egypt thirty-five years

ago. She is an instructive example of white duality, and finds that it also spreads to her children,

despite the fact they have an Arab father.

> A lot of people will come to me and say "You're so lucky because you're getting
>
> extra reward because you converted," but they are non-inclusive. And I think it
>
> shows up more with my daughter because people have called her a "half-breed."
>
> You're not true, you're not real.
>
> **Who said that?**
>
> Guys she's dated. Muslim guys. So I think converts, they know they're Muslim,
>
> but that's as far as it goes. Culturally wise you are never really accepted. Between
>
> men and women, they look at you as damaged or something, or abnormal,
>
> foreign. Like the way Americans look at Muslims—something they don't
>
> understand, they can't conceptualize. I could have a conversation for hours about
>
> this.

Carol spoke of the same sense of being perpetually inauthentic, but framed it in the language of

culture rather than race. However, she did acknowledge that others invoke notions of biological

race, such as the expression "half-breed." Carol's daughter is half Arab, yet her white American

half seemed to disqualify her from full Muslim status. Like many of the converts I interviewed,

Carol takes her faith seriously. She makes a concerted effort to implement Islam into her day-to-

day life in ways that heritage Muslims, such as her ex-husband, may sometimes take for granted.

> My husband has never read the Qur'an. His family, they think they know Islam,
> but they don't. He will tell me all the time "No no no, this this this!" and I'm like
> "Honey, read this" [laughs] . . . .When I first came to my current mosque my
> husband didn't go to the mosque, didn't know anyone at the mosque, didn't
> encourage me to go, would not go.

Carol knows more about Islam, practices it more, and is more connected to her Muslim community than her now ex-husband. Yet she felt she has never been fully recognized by others as authentically Muslim, while he is regarded as intrinsically Muslim. She expanded on this topic by detailing her frustration when dealing with heritage Muslims who are simultaneously ignorant of their religion yet arrogant in their possession of it.

> Every natural born Muslim [thinks] that their culture is the strongest one, and the
> way they practice is the greatest, the best, the only way and everyone else is
> wrong. It's totally nationalism. They are not following the tenets of Islam that as a
> convert you read and you learn; they are following the way they've been raised.

This harkens back to Janet's assertion that heritage Muslims do not live up to the ideals of their faith. This may be true of many people of all faiths, yet the point here is that heritage Muslims do not get their Muslimness from putting their faith into works, but rather from their racial, cultural, and national heritage. This dynamic is at work in other faiths as well. Hammond and Warner (1993) write of *ethnic religion,* where an ethnic identity is so tied to a religion that members need not be observant practitioners. An example of this could be Irish or Italian Catholics who only attend Mass at Christmas or Easter, yet still retain an authentically Catholic identity in so much as it is tied to their ethnic heritage. Alternatively, converts such as Carol make a concerted effort to live their faith, yet never attain recognition from others as authentically Muslim.

Whiteness and Mistrust

"If a young white Muslim convert comes into a mosque. . . there's going to be a bit of a question as to who is this person? Is this guy FBI?" — Clive

While few interviewees brought up being the object of suspicion, those who did made it clear that the specter of mistrust was no stranger to them. Vanessa, introduced earlier, was the only black respondent to report having been the object of suspicion. She overheard a second-generation heritage Muslim gossiping about her to a group of young women not long after converting, "Uh, guys, what do we really know about her?" It appears that, while uncommon overall, suspicion was more common among white respondents in my sample.

As mentioned, many of the converts I interviewed were regular attendees at a large, multi-ethnic mosque in the mid-Florida region. This mosque had been subjected to scandal approximately five years earlier. A white man had "converted," joined the community, and become engaged to a young woman of Palestinian descent. It was eventually revealed that the conversion was fake, the man an FBI operative, and his true intention had been to build a case against his future father-in-law. Such incidents may be rare, but they are not soon forgotten by the congregations they impact. Uzayr, a 24-year-old Uber driver, even made reference to this incident during our interview. His father is Puerto Rican and his mother is of white European descent. He informed me several times during the interview that he identifies as Latino and not as white, but also conceded that he "looks white," and is regarded as white by others. He spoke at length of his belief that heritage Muslims prefer white converts, yet also recalled being the object of suspicion by others in the early days after his conversion.

So with the white, it just goes to the great white hope concept. That there's this white privilege here in the West—even with people coming from countries that

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were colonized—there's this idea that white is better. The lighter, the brighter, the

better [laughs], and dark is bad. So it's like, oh, black people becoming Muslim?

That happens all the time! But a white person? Oh my God, wow, that's so

amazing! An advanced person! He's white! We have a white guy! Like in

basketball: Oh, we got a black guy! There's stereotyping of somehow white being

better, and I guess they were disappointed to find out I wasn't white [laughs]. And

with the whole spy thing, this city has a history of spies, of FBI coming to our

mosques, of our mosques being watched, of organizations such as CAIR being

under surveillance, and there have been spies in the community. In some ways

they were justifiably concerned, but to just outright assume that isn't fair to me, or

to anyone that comes to our religion. That could easily turn someone away . . . .

Unfortunately, in our community there is a race problem: out of the converts,

whites are best, and out of the community as a whole, Arabs are best. That

problem has led to so many other problems for me.

Uzayr's quote illustrates the dual nature of whiteness within heritage Muslim-centric spaces.

These communities may be simultaneously pleased to see whites joining their faith—and

suspicious of those who do so. From his perspective, heritage Muslims' preference for white

converts is both a reflection of the U.S.'s racial hierarchy, and of the supposed regularity of

black Americans embracing Islam compared to the presumed novelty of whites doing so. Uzayr

also mentioned but did not elaborate upon the implications of heritage Muslims finding out he

"wasn't white," other than to laugh off their "disappointment."

Nicholas, a 46-year-old butcher who had converted 10 years prior, did not once bring up

his whiteness or the fact that he was racially and ethnically different than his co-religionists, yet

he described several encounters that appeared to be predicated on this difference; encounters with arguably racialized contours. He described one such incident that took place one night after he left a predominantly Arab mosque:

During Ramadan, after the prayer, we were at a local gas station, and a man who had also been at the mosque came to me and asked me why I had been coming to that mosque. I was like "Excuse me?" and he was like "You don't understand Arabic, right?" and I was like, "I'm learning..." and he was like "Why do you go there if they don't speak English?" And I was like "Well, I'm comfortable with it." And from that point on I was like wow, why would he say something like that to me? Why would he think?... That's the first time, in all the years, I've never had someone come up and say something like that to me. I was scratching my head, like, "Why are you here?" You're here for the same reason I'm here—to worship God. So what's the problem? I was kind of taken aback, and kind of hurt by that. Why would you think that you belong here more than I do?

The reasons why Nicholas was confronted by this man are unclear. Was it because he overheard him speaking in English, when most members of that community converse in Arabic? Did he suspect that Nicholas was there to spy on the Muslim community? What is clear in any case is that his racial identity set him apart. He is easily recognized as white, and his accent is clearly American—both factors distinguish him from the congregants of this small, predominantly Arab mosque. Of significance here is not simply that his racial identity set him apart, but that he was virtually oblivious to its effect. Nicholas did not discuss this encounter or any of his experiences—positive or negative—in racial terms. The tendency among whites to not perceive their race as having a meaningful impact on their lives is what Doane (2003) refers to as "white

transparency." Nicholas therefore seems to be unaware—or perhaps unwilling to mention—that his racial identity as a white American may be affecting the way he is perceived by heritage Muslims. Nicholas' "colorblind" attitude regarding the suspicion he encountered from this man contrasts with Uzayr's feeling that heritage Muslims are "justifiably concerned" when white people come to a mosque because of what he called the "history of spies." The FBI has been known to spy on mosques (ACLU n.d.), even enlisting white "converts" to do so (Medina 2011).

Whereas white converts like Alice, Melissa, and Uzayr were explicit in claiming that their whiteness shaped how they were perceived and treated by heritage Muslims, others, such as Carol and Nicholas, talked around race, describing racialized encounters without directly invoking the language of race to explain them. Despite these differences in attribution, the pattern remains clear: to the extent that whites have their authenticity as Muslim converts both affirmed and challenged by heritage Muslims, they may be said to experience white duality.

Thus far the discussion has centered on the racial identities held by these converts and the implications for the authenticity of their religious identity as Muslims. I have argued that being black or white presents a barrier to their acquiring recognition as "real" Muslims. Another way to think about these challenges is to frame them as objections to the converts not being Arab, South Asian, or holding some other racial or cultural heritage that is understood to be traditionally Muslim. In the following section I turn attention to situations in which some converts were afforded greater legitimacy by heritage Muslims, and examine how this often corresponded with the extent to which these converts performed Arab conformity.

Arab Conformity

"In this community the converts are not Arab; they are either black or white or Asian or Hispanic… so it's almost like they [converts] are the black people of the religion." — Vanessa

In an earlier section I defined Arab conformity as an ethnoreligious hierarchy that places Arabs and Arab-centric interpretations and practices of Islam at the top, while simultaneously discouraging or otherwise devaluing other expressions of Muslimness. A number of my interviewees felt that Arab conformity was prevalent in the mosques and Muslim cultural spaces they frequented. Further, as the vignettes below will exemplify, there is a tendency among some converts to adopt those same cultural norms. Those who did, such as by dressing in ways that were recognizably Muslim, or developing their proficiency in Arabic[5], sometimes found themselves held in high esteem by heritage Muslims, though not all my respondents agreed on this point. Thus, whereas Muslimness is ontologically embodied in heritage Muslims— something they simply possess regardless of their piety or practice—it is performative for converts, something they may attain through their manner of dress or speech, a finding also observed among British converts (Moosavi 2012). In this section I begin by considering converts who have adopted Arab conformity and successfully established themselves as authentically Muslim, as evidenced by their reported dearth of negative encounters or challenges from heritage Muslims, first through Arabic or Qur'anic skills, and then through dressing "Islamically." Then I move on to my respondents' rejections of and frustrations with Arab conformity.

Amanda, a 59-year-old white woman, is a prime example of a convert who has achieved a comfortable degree of Muslimness through the ethnoreligious capital gained by adhering to Arab conformity. Amanda was born in Poland but emigrated to the U.S. as a very young child. She converted at 21 and had been a Muslim for 38 years. Amanda is a mother to fifteen

children—nearly all of whom are doctors, currently in medical school, or in high school with plans to study medicine—yet still finds time to work as a health coach and aroma therapist. She speaks Arabic quite well, having learned the language after marrying an Arab man from Palestine. She also dons the markers of Muslim status, such as a headscarf and other traditional Arab dress, making her instantly recognizable as a Muslim. Amanda reported that her experiences with heritage Muslims had been overwhelmingly positive. The only trouble came years ago when she briefly lived with her husband in Jordan. There, she was dismayed to meet secular heritage Muslims who scoffed at her for taking the religion so seriously.

Another example comes from Khateeb, a 67-year-old veteran of the Vietnam War originally from Puerto Rico. Khateeb appears to be of mixed black and white ancestry, yet chose to write in "Hispanic" on the demographic form I had given him.[6] He initially converted to Islam in the 70s, but recommitted to the faith in the 90s after having backslid. Like Amanda, he had all the accoutrements of the stereotypical "Muslim." With his full beard, shaved mustache, excessively baggy pants and *kufi* [a skull cap worn by Muslims], you would be forgiven for assuming he was from the Middle East. Khateeb was married to a Jordanian woman for ten years before she passed, and his eyes welled up with tears every time he mentioned her. One of her lasting gifts to him was teaching him proper recitation of the Qur'an. He spoke of the prestige his language skills bring him at the mosque.

> Especially when they [heritage Muslims] hear me reciting the Qur'an. Being
> Latino, and when they have the Qur'an *halaqah*, the gathering and recitation—
> especially during the month of Ramadan—and right after the prayer we have the
> halaqah and start reciting the Qur'an and they are so—especially the Arabic
> speaking brothers—when they hear me, two or three of them ask me, "Brother

Khateeb, where you learn how to read that Qur'an? Who taught you?"—and I feel

happy and proud.

The Qur'an—which translates literally to "the recitation" (Esposito 2003)—is revered by

Muslims as the most eloquent use of the Arabic language. Khateeb's ability to recite the Qur'an

beautifully provides him with recognition among his Muslim peers, and with it, Muslimness. In

fact, Khateeb twice broke out into a sermon during our interview, complete with sing-song

Qur'anic recitation and commentary.

Amanda and Khateeb are two of the few respondents who reported never facing

challenges to their Muslimness. They both dress in a manner common to religiously devout Arab

Muslims, and both have impressive Arabic skills, which seem to lend them the ethnocultural

capital commensurate with Arab conformity—though this interpretation is complicated by other

cases. Take for example Siddiqah, a 64-year-old black woman who has worked for four decades

as a teacher. Siddiqah dresses in a manner very similar to the women of Saudi Arabia, where she

lived for about ten years. However, unlike Amanda and Khateeb, Siddiqah reported that her

proficiency in Arabic could sometimes make heritage Muslims uncomfortable.

I'd been invited to a women's circle and they were reciting Qur'an—and they're

all Arab—so when I started to recite, I felt something, like I really wasn't

welcome. And I think a big part of that was because I could recite better than

some of them. So, I felt looks or something like that. It wasn't a big thing, but I

did feel that.

Siddiqah insisted that the incident was not significant, and within the context of her forty-two

years as a Muslim—in which she claimed to have never, ever faced any challenges to her

Muslimness—it may not be. The immediate concern is why her ability to recite the Qur'an well,

better than some native speakers, did not invite affirmations to her Muslimness as it had done with Khateeb. Beyond this one incident, Siddiqah regularly found herself to be recognized by others as an excellent source for advice and counseling regarding Islamic matters.

Though few of my respondents could speak Arabic or recite the Qur'an eloquently, about half of them did exhibit a simpler way of acquiring the ethnoreligious capital that confers Muslimness—dressing in a way typically recognized as "Islamic" (Moosavi 2012). For women, this typically involved the very visible sign of Muslim identity—the *hijab*, or headscarf. Some of these women covered their hair but dressed in casual jeans and long-sleeved shirts, others wore long, loose fitting clothing which covered the shape of their bodies even more. Several wore *abayas*, long black robes, making their religious identities difficult to ignore. For the men, this involved wearing *kufis* or *taqiyahs*, skullcaps that are a bit larger than kippahs or yarmulkes. And also *thobes*, which look like ankle length, loose-fitting white dress shirts. These men also sported beards with their mustache shaved, reminiscent of the way Amish men do.

Of the 25 women I interviewed, almost half wore the hijab in their everyday lives, while a similar number reported wearing it occasionally, or only at the mosque. Three did not wear it at all. Of the 14 men, only three could easily be identified as Muslims by the way they dress. Although dressing this way helps them "look the part," it does not necessarily guarantee they will be treated as equal to their heritage Muslim counterparts. Aminah, a 36-year-old black Hispanic woman of Cuban descent once asked a heritage Muslim woman to not speak so loudly in the mosque, to which the woman shouted: "I built this mosque!" Nicole, a 24-year-old black woman told me that heritage Muslims "think they own the religion," and claimed that one had remarked to her, "We don't like for Americans to convert." Both Aminah and Nicole dress Islamically, yet they are still made to feel as if they do not belong. These sentiments fit into a

larger narrative expressed by my interviewees that heritage Muslims feel a sense of ownership of the religion that converts can never quite acquire. Thus, it appears that adopting Arab-centric forms of practice—such as learning Arabic, or learning to recite the Qur'an well, or at least dressing like Arab Muslims—may confer greater Muslimness on a convert, though this is clearly not always the case.

Further, not every convert I spoke to agreed that dressing like heritage Muslims was desirable. Gregory, a 69-year-old black man, lamented the sight of converts dressing in traditional Arab styles of dress. He bemoaned it as "real stupid" when converts,

> walk around feeling that we have to take on the culture of other people from other
>
> countries . . . because what happens with some of us is we think we have to start
>
> wearing *kufis* [Islamic skull caps], or their head wrapped like the Saudis, or we
>
> have to wear a *thobe* [very long and loose shirt] and stuff like that.

A former prison warden and Muslim for 45 years, Gregory felt no need for the affirmations of others, Muslim or not. The same cannot be said for many of my younger respondents, such as Provi, a 19-year-old black Hispanic woman of Puerto Rican descent. She laughed off converts who "don't eat anything but pita bread and hummus," but hit a more somber note when discussing her own struggles with the demands of Arab conformity.

> I like to dance—salsa, all that, African dance, things like that. I saw that in
>
> Atlanta but here it's frowned upon. Here I'm mostly with Arabs, mostly Syrian,
>
> and it was really frowned upon. And I'm not saying to shake my butt to gain
>
> attraction—that's the dance of my culture. That was a really big problem—the
>
> culture thing. I felt like if you weren't Arab enough, you weren't accepted.

Provi had only been Muslim for about seven months when we interviewed. She is a college student at a university in Florida, and has found that while many of her heritage Muslim friends are second-generation Arab American, they are not as accepting of her as she had hoped. Provi found Arab conformity ill-fitting, and felt the traditional forms of dance and dress that she had grown up with were de-valued by heritage Muslims in her community.

These sentiments were echoed even more strongly by Sofia, a black Hispanic woman born in the Dominican Republic but raised in the United States. Sofia is 24-years-old, and a graduate student of history at an Ivy League university in the north east. Like her friend Alexa, introduced earlier, Sofia studied Islam in a strictly academic sense at first before ever considering that she might convert. The two attend the same university, and both had joined a study abroad trip to Morocco two years prior, during which they developed a deep appreciation for Morocco's people and culture. However, this appreciation turned out to be a one-way street. Sofia has come to feel that "most Muslim cultures are the opposite of Latino culture." She elaborated:

> I'd say that most Latinos go under the motto of—if you have it, flaunt it. And
> most Muslims go under the motto of—if you have it, cover it. So that has been
> really difficult for me. I know I fluctuated a lot. Things like showing my hair,
> showing my shoulders, arms—these are things that I haven't completely lost
> because I feel like I'm not ready to let go, just because I don't feel that it is
> harmful to anybody, and I feel that it would be a losing of myself if I were to let
> go of that right now.

Sofia was caught between the Arab conformity she experienced with heritage Muslims, and the love she has for her own cultural heritage. She felt that her cultural heritage is de-valued by this

narrow interpretation of the religion. This is more an internal struggle for Sofia rather than an external one, as her Muslim community—a Muslim student association at her university—and its leadership, are understanding of her on-again off-again relationship with hijab. Sofia did not conform to the way heritage Muslim women in her community dress, but unlike Provi, she said she did not feel judged. Provi and Sofia's comments were the only times any of my eleven Hispanic identifying interviewees attributed a negative experience to their ethnicity.

Conclusion

Christiano et al. (2008:151) write, "religious identities are often intimately connected to ethnic (or racial or national) identities, and indeed in many instances these identities can be seen as mutually reinforcing." This paper has addressed this linkage between racial and religious identities by exploring the problem of authenticity for American Muslim converts, whose racial and religious identities are not "mutually reinforcing," but rather distinctly different, resulting in a lack of authenticity, or what I have called Muslimness. This lack of authenticity typically manifests in the form of challenges and contestations to their Muslim identity. These challenges not only differ by race, with blacks regarded as undesirable and whites preferred yet patronized, but are situated in narrow, racialized understandings of what it means to be Muslim. Muslimness is something that heritage Muslims inherently possess, and converts cannot truly acquire. This takes Muslimness out of the realm of orthodoxy and orthopraxy—of right belief and right practice—and places it in the realm of racial and culture heritage. The attention given to racial identity in this analysis is strengthened—indeed, mandated—by the sheer fact that half the respondents introduced race into the conversation themselves. This is not to suggest that all challenges to their Muslimness were racially motivated, yet none of the challenges to

authenticity presented in this paper could be explained by recourse to Islamic orthodoxies. In other words, in the examples presented earlier, these converts did not have their Muslimness challenged because they were unobservant or incompetent Muslims, though a handful of challenges were at least framed in this way.

Although the challenges to their Muslimness came in a variety of forms, there was a strong tendency for my respondents to invoke their racial identities when discussing them. Black respondents in particular recounted multiple instances of direct, overt racism, and examples of challenges to their religious identity that were either overtly racial, or at least interpreted by them as racially motivated. In fact, some black interviewees told me that I should have included questions about race in the interview schedule. This does not "prove" that heritage Muslims are racist—and that is not the intention of this analysis—although it must be said that some of my respondents certainly believe that some heritage Muslims hold prejudiced attitudes toward them.

White respondents were more likely to report positive experiences, and most did not invoke race when discussing their experiences, positive or negative. Of the roughly one-third of whites who did bring up race in the interviews, their experiences have shed light on a phenomenon I refer to as white duality, in which whiteness confers both privilege and disadvantage. White duality manifests among these converts such that they find their Muslimness both celebrated and contested. These respondents had come to understand that their whiteness conferred on them the reverence of many heritage Muslims—who found the conversion of whites to Islam to be a point of pride and affirmation—yet their whiteness was also a perpetual mark of difference and un-belonging, and sometimes suspicion.

Interviewees with a Hispanic or Latina/o ethnicity reported experiences commensurate with those of either white or black converts, depending into which category they were racialized.

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Though two converts expressed the sentiment that Hispanic culture was looked down upon, these claims did not reference any specific statement or action of a heritage Muslim to denigrate Latino culture, but rather that the respondents felt that their culture was incongruent with Islamic beliefs and values. The finding that the experiences of Hispanic and Latino/a converts were not distinctly different from those of non-Hispanic black and white respondents was surprising. This is not to say that heritage Muslims do not recognize Latina/os as a distinct category, but rather that my data does not speak directly to this issue and therefore did not allow me to make comparisons. Husain (2017b) argues that the experiences of Muslim Americans—who come in a wide variety of races and ethnicities—are nonetheless best understood as situated within a black-white binary. If this is correct, then it would make sense for heritage Muslims to adopt the same black-white racial framework that has shaped their own experiences in the U.S.

New immigrants use racism to distinguish themselves from black Americans, even black immigrants like those in Waters' (1999) study of West Indians in New York. Other examples include some Hispanics' preference for identifying with non-Hispanic whites rather than non-Hispanic blacks (Lee and Bean 2007); Miami's Cuban dominated racial hierarchy which places black Haitians at the bottom (Aranda et al. 2015); and Asian immigrants' use of racist stereotypes of black Americans as culturally inferior (Dhingra 2003). In each case, these immigrant groups used anti-blackness to differentiate themselves and climb the racial ladder. Some heritage Muslims—especially immigrants—appear to have adapted to the U.S. racial hierarchy by participating in anti-black racism in an attempt to mitigate their own oppression.

Simultaneously, heritage Muslims sometimes treated white converts with reverence, as they were the "right kind of convert." However, the manner in which this operates is different from what has been observed in previous research of immigrant groups "becoming white." For

example, rather than heritage Muslims aligning themselves with whites as Irish (Ignatiev 1995) and Italian (Alba 1985) immigrants once had, the conversion of whites to Islam may be perceived as them aligning themselves with heritage Muslims. This is evident in the finding that those converts who adapt to Arab conformity by dressing "like Muslims" or learning Arabic received fewer challenges to their Muslimness than those that did neither. In this scenario, it allows heritage Muslims a triple benefit: first, feeling that their religion is validated through willing conversion; second, the mitigation of their oppression through their differentiating between themselves from black Americans; and three, boosting their profile through the addition of whites to the community.

This research also speaks to the ways race and religion are mutually informative categories. Emerson et al. (2015) observe that race and religion are entwined in a kind of "feedback loop," and offer immigrant Muslims as an example of a situation "where religion and ethnicity are often conflated" (p. 354). In such cases the religion and its adherents are racialized, and the lines between where the racial category ends and the religious one begins become blurred. For example, according to Franks (2000), heritage Muslims in England so deeply associate their faith with their culture that they find the idea of an "English Muslim" incomprehensible. Further, Franks argues, non-Muslims are similarly confused by the idea that a white woman could have willingly chosen to become Muslim. The dynamics in the United States are similar. The racialization of Islam and Muslims in the broader U.S. society, coupled with a context of Arab conformity within heritage Muslim communities, combine to deny converts an authentic Muslim identity. Thus, Muslim authenticity is primarily available to those with the embodied ethnoreligious capital to command it. The ethnoreligious capital that produces Muslimness takes on two forms. For heritage Muslims it is akin to an embodied capital, a result

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of their being born with the "right" racial, ethnic, and national heritage. Their authentic Muslim identities are written onto their bodies. For converts this ethnoreligious capital is performative, in that it takes the form of adherence to Arab conformity, such as dressing like a (Arab) Muslim, or learning to speak Arabic or at least recite the Qur'an in Arabic.

Although Muslim converts can acquire some degree of Muslimness through Arab conformity, there remains one immutable fact that they cannot change: their race. Belonging to racial categories that are not associated with Islam and Muslims in any kind of normative, cultural, or historical sense forever marks converts as different, and reveals the extent to which race is the fulcrum on which Muslimness is poised.

Future Research

Just as some converts embraced Arab conformity in an apparent attempt at gaining recognition as authentically Muslim, it may be that some converts would take the opposite approach and emphasize their distance from Americaness. I did not find any evidence of this among my interviewees, but would not expect them to employ such a tactic during an interview with another American. If they did it would likely be around first-generation immigrant Muslims. Future research should examine whether or not this is the case, and if so, it would contribute to our understanding of what it means for an American convert to be authentically Muslim, and how they come to garner this recognition.

One thread running through these interviews that deserves attention is the phenomenon of converts gaining authenticity by proxy from their heritage Muslim spouses. Many of my respondents were married to heritage Muslims, and at least one explicitly mentioned "using" her spouses' ethnicity to leverage a sense of belonging among heritage Muslims. How these

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partnerships supply converts with the ethnoreligious cultural capital needed to establish authentic Muslim identities should be explored.

Notes

1 *Gheebah*, or gossiping, is considered a major sin in Islam. See Qur'an 49:12.

2 Muhammad's Final Sermon, also known as the "Farewell Sermon," is well-known among Muslims, and contains the following text: "All mankind is from Adam and Eve, 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 (*taqwa*) and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly. Do not, therefore, do injustice to yourselves."

3 The similarities and differences between Shias and Sunnis are complex and well beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that both sides regard the other as less legitimate. A number of my respondents, especially African Americans who converted in the late 70s and early 80s, preferred not to identify as Sunni or Shia, but rather as "simply a Muslim," or some similar phrase. Perhaps to distance themselves from this rivalry. However, they all attended Sunni mosques.

4 Evidence for this assumption may be found in the fact that a couple of respondents danced around the subject of race, while others reluctantly invoked it. For example, Joshua, a white man, told me he is revered by heritage Muslims. When I asked why he thought that was, he provided several half-hearted answers before finally acknowledging that it is likely due to him being Jewish. Janet, a black woman, apologized to me twice during the interview after complaining about racist white people. These interactions and others have led me to think that—all things being equal—had these respondents been interviewed by a person of color there may have been either a greater or lesser invocation of race and racism.

5 Some even invoked these skills during the interview in a manner that seemed intended to convey their aptitude. I interpret these efforts as identity management within the interview setting, and at times, perhaps ironically, as challenges to my own Muslimness. Nicholas, for example, peppered his sentences with rudimentary Islamic terminology, and almost always paused after each term to offer a quick translation or explanation. For example, when retelling his conversion story, Nicholas said, "So I went and took the *shahada*, the testimony of faith, May 7th, 2007, after *Isha* prayer, which is the fifth and final prayer of the day."

6 Khateeb was one of only two respondents to write "Hispanic" on their demographic form under race, the other being Miguel. All the other Hispanic respondents chose to identify as either white Hispanic or black Hispanic, though in the interviews they would sometimes use the words Latino or Latina, or make specific reference to their parent's country of origin, such as when Khateeb jokingly referred to himself as a "crazy Puerto Rican."

CHAPTER FIVE:

ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has employed racialization theory to make sense of the Muslim experience in the West. Research shows that if Muslims don religious markers—such as a hijab—they are racialized as "Muslim" and associated with negative stereotypes concerning Islam. This (ethno)racialization has also been found to extend to white Muslim converts who wear these markers, sometimes subjecting them to anti-Muslim prejudice. The current study picks up this thread, comparing the experiences of converts who are white with those of people of color. Findings suggest that white converts are only subjected to prejudice if they wear Muslim religious markers, not simply for having converted. Black converts who wear these markers are met with both positive and negative appraisals. The current study also provides insight into how converts understand and respond to their racialization. Finally, I discuss my findings in light of what they tell us about the power of religious or cultural markers to (ethno)racialize their wearers, and the disruption these markers cause to the racial hierarchy, specifically that wearing Muslim religious markers is met with prejudice because it signals a challenge to the normativity of whiteness.

CHAPTER FIVE:

RELIGIOUS MARKERS AND RACIALIZATION

Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, not all religions are equal in the United States. Christianity has long been the religion of choice, and is deeply embedded in the cultural and legal fabric of the country. Islam, on the other hand, holds a notoriously different place in the public mind. As a religion, Islam is deeply racialized, that is, it is associated with a particular racial or ethnic category, primarily Arabs and the Middle Easterners (Bayoumi 2006; Beyyette 2015; Gotanda 2011; Joshi 2006). Recent scholarship has employed racialization theory to make sense of the Muslim experience in the West. Despite the tremendous racial and ethnic diversity of Muslim Americans (ISPU 2017; Pew 2017), they are typically lumped into one generic "Muslim" category, which I will argue is a racialized stereotype. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will use the term Muslim to refer to adherents to the religion of Islam, and "Muslim" (in quotations) to refer to this racialized stereotype. The distinction is crucial; all of the converts in this study have chosen to be Muslim, yet none of them wish to be racialized as "Muslim."

Religious markers—such as the hijab for women, or kufi for men—announce one's identity as a Muslim, and in doing so racialize the wearer as a "Muslim." This (ethno)racialization has also been found to extend to white Muslim converts who wear these markers, sometimes subjecting them to anti-Muslim prejudice. Though estimates of the number of Muslim Americans vary widely, from 3.35 million (Pew 2017) to roughly 7 million (Bagby 2011), about 20% are thought to be converts (Pew 2017). Among these converts, some begin

wearing religious markers, demarcating their social identity as Muslim. This paper seeks to understand how adopting these religious markers racializes the convert as "Muslim," and how this may be experienced differently depending on the convert's racial or ethnic identity.

I begin by discussing Islam's status as a non-chartered, racialized religion within the U.S. context. I then consider scholarship on the racialization of Muslims by the presence of religious markers. I next review previous research on the racialization of white converts in England, France, and the United States before turning to interview data with 39 white, black, and Latino/a converts in the U.S. to examine how they experience and respond to this racialization differently. Data show that wearing Islamic religious markers such as the hijab is the primary mechanism by which white converts are racialized as "Muslims," sometimes subjecting them to anti-Muslim prejudice. This corresponds with similar findings in England (Moosavi 2015a) and France (Galonnier 2015). Converts not wearing these markers were not coded as "Muslim"—even if they had divulged their Muslim identity. For people of color who were already racialized in harmful ways, wearing religious markers produced more complicated effects—sometimes even raising their status rather than lowering it as with whites. Interview data also revealed the strategies that some converts employed to mitigate the effects of being racialized. Finally, I discuss my findings in light of what they tell us about the power of religious or cultural markers to (ethno)racialize their wearers, and the disruption these markers cause to the racial hierarchy.

The Status of Islam and Muslims in the United States

Sociologists have long predicated their work on the assumption that shared cultural codes of meaning inform our understanding of the social world around us. Cultural codes can be thought of as bundles of shared meanings circulating throughout a society or culture (DiMaggio

1997; Loseke 2007). They provide a heuristic of sorts that allow us to think and communicate

with abstractions about types of people and types of things, lumping and splitting the world into

manageable interpretive categories (Zerubavel 1996). Many cultural codes have widely

dispersed, agreed upon meanings: crooked politicians, doting housewives, computer nerds—all

are abstractions that represent "types" of people in a shared cultural imagination. The idea of

cultural codes may be applied to social institutions as well. These codes shape our ideas of what

does (or should) constitute a family, legal system, or religion. One way of thinking about shared

or collective meanings about religion can be found in the idea of charter religions. *Charter*

religions are those most commonly associated with the people, culture, traditions, and history of

a country (Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind 2009). They enjoy both legal and cultural recognition,

and are a part of the national identity. In the United States, Protestantism and Catholicism—and

to a lesser extent Judaism—are regarded by scholars as the charter religions. Although individual

or group-based evaluations of these religions can vary widely, they are widely recognized as

common and acceptable forms of religion in the United States. Further, Christmas and Easter are

nationally recognized federal holidays, most lawmakers at the state and federal levels come from

Christian backgrounds, many even make appeals to their faith while campaigning for office, and

new Christian churches are regarded as uncontroversial additions to a neighborhood. This kind of

recognition solidifies and reifies Christianity's symbolic status within American society,

simultaneously concretizing the continuing significance of Christianity to American cultural

identity. While other faiths—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—may be growing rapidly,

they do not enjoy the same legal and cultural recognition, nor are they a part of the identity of

most Americans. The holidays of non-charter religions pass by largely unnoticed, few lawmakers

belong to these faiths—so few that they make the national news when elected—and the building

of new places of worship can be fraught with controversy, perhaps mostly in the case of mosques.

Broadly speaking, belonging to a charter religion is thought to have positive consequences for one's social status. Yang and Ebaugh (2001) compared the case of Christian and Buddhist immigrants from China, observing that Christians found themselves in a favorable position, as they go from religious minority (in China) to members of the religious majority (in the U.S.), while Buddhist immigrants did not. Further, immigrants belonging to non-charter religions can raise their social status by converting to a charter religion. Conversely, U.S. citizens can experience a lowering of status by converting to a non-charter religion (Alba et al. 2009). This may be especially true of converts to Islam. Besides its non-charter status—and therefore symbolic exclusion from American society—Islam is often associated with violence, terrorism, and barbarity (Cainkar 2011; Jackson 2010; Nagra 2010; Said 1997), and therefore held in especially low regard by many Americans. Survey data reveal that many Americans believe Islam and the U.S. have incompatible values (Cox and Jones 2015), and hold Muslims in lower regard than any other religious group, even lower than atheists (Pew 2017). A 2016 study found that 50% of Americans agreed that "Islam is not part of mainstream American society," and 41% agree that "Islam encourages violence more than other faiths" (Lipka 2017). According to FBI data, 2016 saw more violent attacks (127) against Muslims in the United States than any year prior, including 2001 and 2002, which saw 93 and 34 violent attacks respectively (Kishi 2017). Further, 60% of Muslims in the U.S. reported facing religious discrimination of some form in 2016, and the rate was even higher for women, Arabs, and younger Muslims (ISPU 2017).

These findings should not surprise, as Islam and Muslims have been regarded as antagonistic, backward, and dangerous by Western audiences for decades (Said 1978; 1981).

Writing especially on Western media portrayals, Edward Said (1981) has argued that Islam has often been "looked at first of all as if it were one monolithic thing, and then with a very special hostility and fear" (p. 4). Put differently, Western conceptions of Islam and Muslims frame them as "all the same, while also different and dangerous." Said (1981) goes on to explain that Islam is not only portrayed as a monolithic "other," it is also regarded as antagonistic, in a "confrontational relationship with whatever is normal [and] Western" (p. 42), because it is "medieval and dangerous, as well as hostile and threatening" (p. 157).

Islam as a Racialized Religion

The cultural codes through which we perceive Islam are bound up in perceived evaluations of its foreignness, antagonism, and hostility to the West. Further, cultural perceptions of Islam are intertwined with notions of race and ethnicity in ways that are being met with recent interest by scholars (Emerson et al. 2015; Husain 2017b; Joshi 2006). For example, Husain (2017b:8) argues that religion and race are mutually informative ways of boundary making, and encourages scholars to interrogate how and why this has historically taken place. This overlapping of racial and religious cultural codes is exemplified in a study of immigrant Arab Americans by Ajrouch and Jamal (2007), who found that Arab Americans of Christian faith were more likely to identify themselves as "white" when compared to Muslims from the same countries. They write, "Muslims, when compared to Christians, are less likely to see themselves as part of a mainstream "white" category of identity" (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007:870). One explanation for this is that the United States is recognized as Christian and white. Thus, within the U.S. context, the religious status of these Arab Americans as Christian facilitates their racial status as *white*. This demonstrates both the salience of Christianity's charter status and Islam's

non-charter status in the United States, and reaffirms that both religions are racialized, that is, more closely associated with some racial and/or ethnic categories than others.

The idea that Islam is a racialized religion is not new (Bayoumi 2006; Gotanda 2011; Joshi 2006). As the cultural codes of race and religion are mutually reinforcing, religion often serves as a conduit for the reproduction of racialized meanings (Emerson et al. 2015). An illustrative example may be found in the case of Muslims in Europe. In Germany, the vast majority of Muslims are of Turkish origin or descent, and the cultural codes of Muslim and Turk are tightly interwoven. In France, the majority are of Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian heritage; all North African countries and former colonies of France (Pew 2017). Thus, in the French context, Muslims are coded as North African. In Britain they are mostly of Pakistani heritage, and derogatory terms for Muslims in Britain reflect that. The United States' Muslim population is much more racially and ethnically diverse, yet research indicates that Americans commonly conflate Muslims with Arabs (Arab American Institute 2008). Furthermore, as Gans (2017:345) argues, "racial dominants seem to consider Muslims—and Arabs as well—a race." However, though Muslim Americans are typically regarded as Arab or Middle Eastern—and thus conflated with ideas of "race"—they are most easily recognized as Muslim by the presence of religious signifiers—what may be called Muslim status markers—such as *hijabs* [headscarves], *abayas* [full body robes], *kufis* [skull caps], or other forms of "Islamic dress." It is these markers that carry out the work of racializing individuals as "Muslim."

The (Ethno)racialization of Muslims

In the previous section I reviewed scholarship on the racialization of Islam, the idea that Islam as a religion has become so closely associated with the racial and ethnic heritage of

Arabs/Middle Easterners that the two appear inseparable. In this section I review scholarship that

uses the word "racialization" in a different way. I begin with Omi and Winant's (2015:111)

definition of *racialization*, "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified

relationship, social practice, or group." The way "racial meaning[s]" are extended to a group, for

example, is usually thought to be through immutable physical traits, such as skin tone, eye shape,

or hair. Used in this sense, racialization occurs when an individual is identified as a member of a

"racial group" because of one or more such physical trait(s), then, whatever social and cultural

meanings have been associated with that "racial group" become inscribed onto the individual.

Further, I understand and employ the concept of racialization in what Hochman (2018:3) calls a

"thick" definition, that is, one that tells us something about "how racialized groups are being

understood." In other words, though it is plainly evident that Muslims do not constitute a race or

a racial group in a "thin sense," it is also clear to a growing number of scholars that Muslims are

increasingly thought of, regarded, and treated as a racial group in American society (Galonnier

2015; Hochman 2018; Husain 2017b; Selod and Embrick 2013; Selod 2015; Zopf 2018).

Ethnoracialization is an extension of racialization theory, in which racialized meanings

are attached to cultural artifacts (e.g., clothing) and also to accent, name, or country of origin

(Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004). Markers of a religious identity may operate in the same way,

connecting religious minorities to racial and cultural stereotypes through distinguishing features

of their appearance. Gans (2017:351) has observed that white Americans tend to "describe

Muslims in racial terms," and in the case of Muslim women wearing the hijab, "even clothing

becomes a racialization tool." Selod and Embrick (2013) provided a more elaborate description

of how, for Muslims in the U.S.—the hijab, beard, and Muslim sounding name take the place of

skin color and act as markers of Muslim status or identity. Selod (2015) has articulated this argument more fully:

> Islamic symbols [e.g., hijab] have become so loaded with negative cultural connotations, such as foreigner, enemy of the state, misogynist, submissive, and anti-American, [that] Muslim Americans experience exclusion from the basic privileges citizenship should entail (p.88) . . . [resulting in] de-Americanization, cultural exclusion and a denial of a national identity" (p.78).

As Selod explains, negative connotations are attached to religious symbols. When individuals carry those symbols or markers the meanings are inscribed on the individuals themselves. This is racialization, not by skin color or hair, but by other identifying markers—and as such, it opens the door to prejudice and discrimination. These "cultural artifacts" (Aranda and Rebolo-Gil 2004), referred to by Selod (2015) as "Islamic symbols," are in this analysis referred to as "Muslim status markers" or "religious markers."

Though not all converts adopt the markers of Muslim status, many do, and recent publications explicitly draw attention to the clearly racial dimensions of Muslim convert experience. Kate Zebiri's (2014) work discusses the changes in dress that many Muslim converts undertake, especially women. The adoption of headscarves and other markers of Muslim status is a means of living their religious faith, but it is also a form of boundary work symbolizing the separation of the convert from their non-Muslim countrymen. One of Zebiri's (2014) respondents provided this insight on her wearing of the *abaya* and *niqab* [a long gown that covers the full body and a face veil that only reveals the eyes]:

> But once you decide to cover your clothes, it is as if there is no going back—you have passed the point of no return. And in other people's eyes, you are different

too—you're on a different level….What does the non-Muslim see when he or she

sees us in the street? A relic of a bygone age? A lingering symbol of oppression in

a liberated world? A religious fanatic? A terrorist or terrorist's aide? An outsider,

immigrant, interloper? (p. 178-9).

Thus, not only do immigrant and second-generation Muslims from predominantly Muslim

countries experience racialization, converts do as well, provided they adopt similar religious

status markers. According to Moosavi (2015a; 2015b), white British converts to Islam sometimes

find their whiteness compromised. Those that adopt a headscarf or other items of clothing

associated with Muslims or the Middle East are racialized as "not-quite-white" and become

subjected to "subtle Islamophobia." Galonnier (2015:576) drew similar conclusions when

comparing white American and French converts, writing "In choosing to make their Muslim

spirituality visible, converts discover the world of racial discrimination." This loss of whiteness

and white privilege is precisely the experience of Zebiri's respondent in the above vignette, and

racialization theory provides compelling analytical tools and language for understanding this

phenomenon.

To recap, within the U.S. context, Islam is a non-charter religion that has been

historically denigrated and demonized. Further, it has been racialized to the extent that it is most

commonly associated with people of Arab/Middle Eastern descent, especially immigrants. Since

Islam is a racialized religion, the racial, ethnic, and religious components are mixed into one

general "Muslim" category which is regarded as foreign, dangerous, and non-American.

I do not argue that Muslim Americans *should* be regarded as a distinct ethnoracial minority

group. However, I do acknowledge that Muslim Americans are perceived, evaluated, and

discriminated against in much the same way as other racial minorities. Muslims who don

religious signifiers or status markers are associated with negative stereotypes concerning Islam,

and likewise regarded as non-American both religiously and racially. Some Americans who

convert to Islam adopt these status markers, which may subject them to the same

ethnoracialization and subsequent prejudice. This is more than religious prejudice, because Islam

is so tightly interwoven with notions of foreignness and 'the other' that wearing these markers

effectively neutralizes, problematizes, or otherwise troubles the convert's racial, ethnic, and

national standing. Whereas previous research on the racialization of converts has focused

especially on the experiences of white converts, the current study picks up this thread and

expands on it by also considering the experiences of people of color in the U.S. context. In this

paper I examine how Muslim status markers ethnoracialize converts—a process which is

different depending on whether they are black or white—and also how converts understand and

respond to that racialization.

Methods

This research employs in-depth interviews to garner insight into the personal experiences

of U.S. citizens who have converted to Islam. As a small and widely dispersed population,

Muslim American converts are difficult to adequately sample. Multiple-strand snowball

sampling was employed over a 15-month period, from September 2016 to December 2017.

Altogether, 39 converts were interviewed. These interviews took place in a variety of locales,

including respondents' homes, offices, coffee shops, mosques, shopping malls, and parks. All

interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Respondent names were changed to

ensure confidentiality. Of the 39 converts interviewed for this study, 25 were female and 14

male. A total of 22 respondents were white (17 white and five white Hispanic), along with 15

black respondents (nine black and six black Hispanic), one of Arabic and Hispanic descent, and one of white and Indian descent. All respondents were U.S. citizens, five having been born outside the country. There was a prominent split in age, as 20 respondents were aged 30 or younger, and 14 aged 56 and older. Some had converted only a few months before the interview, others had been Muslim for over 30 years. Approximately half of respondents wore Muslim status markers on a daily basis. Several wore them from time to time or when visiting a mosque. About a third do not wear them at all. Overall, women in my sample were much more likely to wear religious markers than were men, with 11 women wearing them every day, and another 12 wearing them occasionally, such as when visiting a mosque. Among the 14 men interviewed, only three are easily identified as Muslim by the presence of religious status markers. In the case of my interviewees, religious markers or Muslim status markers were usually the hijab for women, often coupled with long, loose fitting clothing, but also sometimes with blue jeans and shirts. Some of these women wore long black robes and hijabs often referred to as *abayas*. There were only a handful of men who wore religious markers. All three wore skullcaps known as *kufis* or *taqiyahs*. Two of them had beards with the mustache trimmed short, much like the Amish. One regularly wears a *thobe*, a kind of long, loose-fitting white dress shirt.

This research has employed a semi-structured interview approach. For example, one of the interview questions from which data for this paper was drawn asks: "Do you ever feel that you have to choose between being a Muslim and being an American? And, if so, who makes you feel that way?" All respondents were asked this question, though it was left to them to interpret. Some chose to speak about non-Muslim Americans who they feel pressure them to choose their American identity over their Muslim one. Conversely, others understood this question to mean Muslims who they feel pressure them to foreground their religious identity at the cost of their

cultural or national identity as Americans. Still others challenged the notion that there was a choice to be made. Although there were a variety of responses to the question, they were marked by racial uniformity. Specifically, whites spoke about non-Muslim Americans as the ones pressuring them to "choose a side," while people of color, especially black Americans, tended to speak about immigrant Muslim communities as the source of such expectations. In addition, although I did inquire as to how my respondents dress in their day to day lives, at work, at the mosque, etc., I did not ask anyone if they thought wearing a hijab or any other religious marker created problems for them. However, as the following vignettes will make clear, many of the converts interviewed directed the conversation to that topic themselves. The interview questions may be found in the Appendix.

Discussion

The central aim of this study is to understand how wearing Muslim status markers (ethno)racializes American converts to Islam, and how their racial or ethnic identity moderates this process. Findings suggest that conversion itself—including the divulgence of their religious identity—is rarely enough to incite prejudicial or discriminatory acts against them. However, dressing like a "Muslim," that is, donning the markers of Muslim status, such as the hijab worn by many Muslim women, does effectively racialize converts as "Muslim," opening the door to negative appraisals from others and sometimes even the troubling of their "American" identities. However, this finding holds truer for white converts than for people of color. The findings section is divided into three themes: first, the centrality of Muslim status markers to the racialization process for white converts; second, this racialization process is interrupted and complicated for people of color, who have notably different experiences than whites; and third,

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the strategies some use to manage or thwart this racialization. In every case, the data and the discussion will mostly focus on the experiences of women, due to the fact that Muslim women in general are often more easily recognizable as Muslims than are men. Further, the women in my study were more likely than the men to wear Muslim status markers. In this first section, I begin with converts who do not wear status markers before moving on to those that do to illustrate the integral role they play in racializing converts. Only converts who don Muslim status markers are racialized as "Muslim." Among converts not adopting these markers—even those who divulge their religious identity to friends and coworkers—discrimination and harassment were virtually non-existent.

Unmarked

"I never had someone harass me, or give me a hard time, or do any hate crimes or anything like that." — Carol

In this and the following section, I argue that Muslim status markers do more than simply *identify* someone as Muslim, they also *racialize* them as "Muslim." Someone may verbally identify themselves as Muslim, but without the presence of a religious signifier, *they are not similarly racialized*. This is significant because it speaks to the crucial role that Muslim status markers play in racializing their wearers, which further speaks to the utility of racialization theory in interpreting Muslim experiences.

Many of my respondents were unmarked by their clothing or name, but did reveal their Muslim identity to friends, coworkers, and classmates. These respondents would likely never be categorized as Muslim based on their appearance. For example, Tony, a white, 21-year-old college student, is unremarkable in comparison to many of the others students at his university in

Florida. There is nothing about his appearance that would suggest he was Muslim. When he divulged his religious identity to an anthropology class, his classmates expressed surprise, but no prejudice. Instead, they were interested to learn more about his choice. He was even working on a report on Muslim converts for a class project. In a follow up conversation a few months later, I learned that his class presentation on the project had been well received. Tony had only been Muslim for a month when I interviewed him, therefore his lack of negative experiences comes with obvious caveats, as he has had few opportunities for them to happen. By comparison, Carol, a 57-year-old white woman, had been Muslim for 30 years. Carol is an elementary school teacher who, until recently, had been married to an Egyptian man.

> I always told everyone that I'm Muslim, and most people that I worked with
> would want to know about it, not the tenets of Islam, but just about the culture of
> Egypt. I had been five times, so they wanted to know what kind of food, and what
> is it like, and what do you do. So even though I don't wear hijab, which is a sign,
> you know, I always told people. I was always upfront, and most people were very
> accepting. *I never had someone harass me, or give me a hard time, or do any hate*
> *crimes or anything like that.* (emphasis added)

Among her work colleagues, Carol's status as a Muslim appears to be overshadowed by her proximity to Egyptian culture and cuisine. Further, her three decades as a Muslim—which she claims have been without incident—lends credence to the premise that Tony has not received negative appraisals simply because he is new to the faith, but rather because he is unmarked as a Muslim.

Natalie is a 25-year-old security guard who had until recently worked as a nightclub promoter. She identifies as Hispanic because her grandparents are from Puerto Rico and El

Salvador, though she can easily pass as white of European descent. Natalie, like some of the women I interviewed, only wore a hijab at the mosque. She claimed to have met with very little resistance after converting, telling me:

> People respected me even more when I became Muslim . . . . From being who I used to be, to being Muslim? . . even a couple of my friends started studying Islam just because I converted. To be a big influence on people, having your whole fan base having your back and supporting what you do, is just amazing. So I really never had any bad experiences at all.

Roughly half the converts I interviewed did not wear status markers, and only one reported having a negative experience with a coworker or colleague after revealing her religious identity. Mary, a white, 21-year-old marketing manager in the corporate offices of a popular fast food chain, spoke of the confusion experienced by a coworker who found out that she is a Muslim.

> I had a conversation with a coworker before I wore hijab, before they knew that I was Muslim and [when they found out] they were like "Oh, okay, what are you?" and I was like, "I'm American…" and they acted like, "That doesn't make any sense." When you tell someone you're Muslim they automatically assume you're from a different country.

Though uncommon in my study, in Mary's case the mere divulgence of her Muslim identity was enough to make her coworker recode her as "from a different country" [i.e., not-American]. This exception notwithstanding, the overall trend for white converts is clear: no religious markers, no problems. Those respondents who do not wear Muslim status markers overwhelmingly reported that they do not face any trouble from coworkers, colleagues, or friends regarding their Muslim

identity. It is worth repeating that although these respondents do not wear Muslim status markers, they do not hide their Muslim identity from others either. Tony, Carol, Natalie, and Mary have not kept their conversion a secret, and each told me that they have let those around them—family, coworkers, classmates, etc.—know about their change in faith. Yet only Mary experienced any troubling of her whiteness or American identity. These findings, coupled with those of the next section, make clear a key finding of this research: divulging one's Muslim identity is not enough to provoke prejudice or discrimination, to do that one must also "look like a Muslim."

Marked

"I have feared for my safety before." — Laylana

Among those converts who wear Muslim status markers, complaints of othering and discrimination were common. The religious markers adopted by these respondents not only announce their Muslim identity, they make it impossible to ignore—thereby increasing the frequency and intensity of negative encounters. These ranged from snide remarks and rejections to harassment and physical intimidation. To better elucidate the difference in experiences by race/ethnicity I begin by examining a few examples of several white respondents, and then later contrast them with vignettes from people of color. For example, Nicholas, a white, 46-year-old butcher, was made to feel as though he did not belong in the country of his birth. He typically wears a *kufi* [Islamic skull cap] while on the job at a grocery store, and was told by a coworker "You're a traitor for being Muslim because we're at war with Muslims." Nicholas was introduced to Islam by his now ex-wife, Susan, who also converted. However, she faced so many

problems after donning Muslim status markers that she soon became fed up and left the faith. Nicholas recounted her story:

> She started wearing hijab and abaya—which is the scarf and the clothing that Muslim women wear to dress modestly. . . . And then the public obviously didn't accept her. She was spit on at a Chuckie Cheese with my son . . . . And then she had somebody follow her down the road, speeding up like they were going to hit her and then backing off, all the way down [a major] avenue. It was about a three mile stretch from where they started and where she turned off and they stopped.

Nicholas went on to explain that troubling encounters such as those described above eventually drove Susan out of the faith. Hers was also the only story where physical harm appeared imminent. More typically, the incidents recounted by my interviewees took the form of microaggressions. For example, Stephanie, a white, 49-year-old physical therapist who wears a hijab, described having discriminatory encounters with several patients:

> Every day I see 8-10 people. So I had this patient, Mr. Shepard, I went out to get him. I said, "I'm Stephanie and I'm going to do your physical evaluation today." He just looked at me. We went back in my office and I started asking questions and he was giving short, one word answers. This guy is just staring me down. I go through the whole thing, treatment regimen, exercise plan, all that. At the end he goes, "So, you're Muslim."
>
> "Yes, I am."
>
> "Well, when you came to get me from the waiting room, I just want you to know I said a quick prayer that I was gonna get through this."
>
> …

I also had a patient at the hospital refuse me. I went into the room and a tech was

with the patient, he asked me to wait outside for five minutes. When he came out

he said someone else would have to see the patient. He said that after I left the

room the patient asked him, "Is she a Muslim? I don't want her in my room at all!

She's not getting anywhere near me!" That's what the tech told me, so I never

saw her.

Recognizing Stephanie as a Muslim because of her hijab, both of these patients exhibited fear in

their encounters with her. This being despite the fact that she was in the role of physical

therapist—she was there to help them. The first patient "prayed" that he would survive a routine

physical examination by a medical professional—a prayer that he deemed necessary after being

confronted by a hijab clad woman with a cheery disposition. The second patient did not want

Stephanie "anywhere near" her because she is a "Muslim." Cases like these demonstrate both

how completely Muslim status markers have become imbued with negative meanings for some

Americans, and how thoroughly they can (ethno)racialize their bearers.

Leah is a 24-year-old white homemaker and mother of two. She regularly wears a black

hijab and abaya, making her among the most covered [i.e., marked] of my respondents. She

recounted a story of being shouted at by a stranger at the grocery store who believed she was

forcing her young daughter to cover the same as her.

I have a three-year-old girl. Sometimes she wants to wear a headscarf out and I

tell her no because I'm worried—and I feel so horrible about that. And I worry

about what any Tom, Dick, and Harry is gonna say to me outside on the street

because "Oh, you're forcing a three-year-old to wear that?!" My daughter has

severe allergies, but she loves to be outside, so I make sure she wears long sleeves

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and long pants. So just the other day I was stopped and a woman was literally screaming at me 'cause my daughter was fully covered. Now in her head, she's thinking—'cause she sees me, my hijab, my abaya—she's thinking that's why I'm covering her, but the reality is, she just has allergies! *If I wasn't wearing a headscarf, even if I was Muslim but wasn't wearing a headscarf, nobody would say anything to me.* They'd be like, "Oh, that's her kid, let her do whatever she wants." But because I'm [hijabi] Muslim they feel like they can totally come into my life and tell me how I should raise my kid. . . because I'm wearing a headscarf they feel like they have the right to tell me how to raise my child. (emphasis added)

It is not uncommon for young girls to emulate their mother's dress, but in Leah's case she worries it would not be seen as cute, but rather as oppressive. Further, Leah has no choice but to cover her daughter up due to her allergies, but she does so knowing that people will misinterpret this as well. From their perspective, it must look as though she is forcing her very young daughter to accept a life of sexist oppression. She repeated twice that it was because of her headscarf that strangers feel they can criticize her and her parenting, and if it were not for her headscarf, this would not happen.

Each of these converts faced a different kind of discrimination: Nicholas was called a traitor to the U.S. by a coworker; Susan was spit upon at a restaurant and followed by an aggressive driver; Stephanie was regarded as threatening by patients to whose care she was entrusted; and Leah was screamed at and made to feel like a "bad mother." The incidents are different, but in each case they are attributable to the presence of Muslim status markers. It is

these markers that do the heavy lifting of racializing their bodies and denoting them as un-American, potentially dangerous, and deserving of mistrust and criticism.

The fact that white Muslim converts who do not bear status markers report facing no discrimination—even from people who know they are Muslim—coupled with the finding that those who bear status markers do experience discrimination, suggests that *converts can be Muslims, but they cannot look like Muslims*. But why? What is it about Muslim status markers that makes them a bridge too far? The key to understanding this is to consider the status of Islam in American society. Whereas charter religions enjoy a privileged place in the culture, non-charter religions have no such pedestal to stand on. In fact, Islam is perhaps the most denigrated faith in the American context (Said 1981). Additionally, and as noted above, Islam is a deeply racialized religion associated with Arabs and Middle Easterners specifically, who are routinely portrayed and perceived as dangerous and threatening (Cainkar 2011). As such, objection to Muslim status markers on white bodies may signal more than just a discomfort with their religious identity, but also with the racialized aspects of that religious identity as made manifest by markers such as the hijab. More specifically, the discomfort emanates from the overt display of this racialized identity on otherwise "unmarked" white bodies in a society that still prides itself as color-blind. Put differently, it is the impossible to ignore racializing of white bodies in the public sphere that "offends" the eyes of onlookers by disrupting the racial status quo. Further, wearing these religious markers displays the conviction of their faith, a faith which is regarded as un-American and even in conflict with American values.

Despite the numerous problems associated with wearing Muslim status markers, a few respondents saw a silver lining in that they gained a greater awareness of the hard truth of racial discrimination. For these white converts, this also meant a realization of their previously

unmarked status. Stephanie and Leah, introduced earlier, are both married to immigrant Muslim

men, and have become more sensitive to their husbands' complaints of racism. Stephanie

described how wearing hijab has made her more sympathetic toward people of color:

> I felt like it [hijab] was kind of interfering with my work a little bit, and my
>
> patients would get obsessed, ask me questions and questions, and then things just
>
> got more opinionated. I worked in a small town and it was just...I feel like I'm
>
> friendlier to blacks, to Latinos, to Jews, to anyone who might not fit in the perfect
>
> little box. I feel like I'm more open to them because I want people to be more
>
> open to me. . . . When they were arguing over Obama being a Muslim, I
>
> remember saying, "No, he's not!" instead of saying "Who cares?". . . . Back then
>
> I didn't know, so I was in those little thoughts I had. I didn't think I had it, but
>
> that's kind of a racist remark.

Stephanie recalled a political tiff in which then President Obama's critics had derided him as a

Muslim. At the time, she challenged the assertion that he was Muslim, but not the underlying

assumption that being a Muslim was a bad thing to be. She now regards her old attitude of

indifference to the distinction as "kind of racist." Leah spoke of how being racialized as Muslim

has opened her eyes to a world of discrimination that she had previously dismissed as

exaggerated or overblown.

> I feel like my husband even, he was born Muslim, but he's dark skinned. He
>
> doesn't have the, you know, Muslim style beard or wear a thobe outside, but he's
>
> visibly Muslim, so he gets—everyday he gets something. But as a white person,
>
> where I am extremely pale, like I am white, white, white, white! I had never, uh,
>
> what's the word, I've never experienced any type of discrimination in my life, so

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after putting on a scarf it was like, "Wow, okay, this exists. Wow, this isn't made

up; this is a real thing." It was something that I was just not used to or accustomed

to. I guess you could say I was ignorant of this situation because I'd never

experienced it. I'd be like, "Oh, it's not that bad, I'm sure" But when you walk

into a room and literally every single eye is on you, then you're like, "Oh wow,

okay, this is what it is." And I'm still white! It's not like I'm getting that much

discrimination, but just the little bit that I am getting, I'm just like "Wow!" It

opens your eyes.

Leah attributes the discrimination her husband receives to him being dark skinned, while hers is

the result of her hijab and abaya. She marvels at the fact she is racialized despite being white.

Conversely, as I have argued, she is racialized *because* she is white. More precisely, because she

is white and marked as a "Muslim."

Galonnier's (2015:579) work on white Muslim converts found that their racial identities

were "affected and reconfigured by religious conversion." My findings suggest that this is

primarily the result of wearing Muslim status markers. People do not seem to object to my white

respondents having converted per se, but they do object to them dressing like Muslims. In light

of this, the prejudicial treatment these converts encountered is not merely religious identification

and religious prejudice—there is a strong racial element to it as well. I argue that three things

occur when white people are observed wearing Muslim status markers: One, they are identified

as members of a religious category referred to as Muslims. Two, they are racialized as members

of the denigrated category of "Muslims," and therefore regarded as un-American at best and

terrorists at worst. And third, their whiteness is problematized, which by extension reveals that

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whiteness can be disrupted, challenged, and weakened. I will return to this third point in the conclusion.

Black, Brown, and Marked

The findings of the previous section contrast sharply with this next set of respondents. For black and Latina/o converts, the racializing effect of Muslim status markers was complicated by their already racialized bodies. The result being that they did not always find themselves racialized as "Muslims" as readily as did white respondents. Consequently, their accounts covered a broader range of experiences. I begin here with respondents who feel that adopting religious signifiers has, or would, increase their vulnerability as minorities. For example, Provi, a 22-year-old black Hispanic college student whose parents emigrated from Puerto Rico, was harassed only a few months after converting while wearing a headscarf, "The day after Trump was elected somebody yelled at me, 'I hope you get deported!' and I was just thinking, 'Deported back to America? Wow.'" Being racialized is nothing new to Provi. Her dark skin and Puerto Rican heritage have always racialized her, yet before she began wearing a hijab she had never been told that she deserved to be deported. In Provi's experience, her status as visibly Muslim seemed to take precedence over the fact that she is black and Hispanic. Notably, this was not the case for Aminah, a 35-year-old pre-school teacher originally from Cuba. Like Provi, Aminah is also black Hispanic, and visibly Muslim by the presence of her headscarf, yet she felt that people are more focused on her status as an immigrant than as a Muslim. Aminah explained her situation,

> Let me tell you, I feel like a Cuban living in America because American society
>
> reminds me every day that I'm not from here. Not because I don't wanna feel

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from here. . . . here, the media, the people, you go somewhere, and if you have an accent, they treat you like you're really stupid, like "Huh, huh?" I know I have accent…

Aminah described being othered and made to feel unwelcome as an immigrant with an accent, but not as a "Muslim," even though she wears a hijab and long, loose-fitting clothing. The examples of Provi and Aminah break the pattern of ethnoracialization found among white converts and add a layer of complexity. This complexity was also observed among non-Hispanic black converts. Vanessa, a black, 29-year-old marketing coordinator, usually chooses not to wear the hijab in public, though she may wear it while attending the mosque. She told me, "Although society sometimes makes it seem like Muslims are not American, society also makes black people feel like we are not Americans . . . If a black person puts on a hijab—she's black." As far as Vanessa is concerned, her blackness is a more powerful racializer than the hijab, or perhaps she was never really considered "American" in the first place. Likewise, Janet, a 56-year-old black elementary teacher, has spent much of her life feeling marginalized by racism. She spoke at length about her experiences of racism, and how they had shaped her view of being a Muslim and being an American.

I'm not a patriotic person because I just feel that there's so many injustices, there's so much racism that I can't put America on a pedestal. I don't have anything against the average American, as far as we're all human beings, but the racism, and now Islamophobia, so I've got those double things.

Janet wears a long, black abaya and hijab, and used to wear a *niqab* or face veil when she was younger. Whereas Vanessa does not usually wear Muslim status markers outside of the mosque, Janet does, and is subsequently racialized as "Muslim" and subjected to Islamophobia. In this

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regard at least, her racialization is similar to that of white converts. Yet just like Provi and Aminah above, the experiences of black converts came with additional layers of complexity, such as the weight of anti-black racism.

Other black women, some of whom were friends of Janet and dressed similarly, reported having notably different experiences. Aysha, a 65-year-old restauranteur told me "Islam is respected by African American people because of the people who became Muslim: Muhammad Ali, and people like that…. So Islam is respected, even by those who are not Muslim." According to Aysha, adopting Muslim status markers has not produced any negative consequences for her. On the contrary, she, and several other women of color, stated that being recognized as Muslim has raised their status, and not only within the black community.

> The African American people are very accepting of Muslims. And I have a lot of incidents where African American men in particular, you know, they open the door, they treat you with a lot of respect, more so than the non-Muslim counterparts that they have. . . . So, uhm, other races of people, I've never had any negative comments from Caucasian people, I think because they're well-traveled and they are more knowledgeable of different religions and I think they understand, some of them, understand what Islam is and Islam isn't. I know there is a population who are influenced by the media, but I've never had any negative situations.

This sentiment was echoed by others, like Siddiqah, a 64-year-old vice principal at a private school. She claimed that the worst she had faced was a child saying "There go the ninjas" as she walked by in a black hijab, abaya, and niqab—a comment she laughed off then and now. Much like Aysha, Siddiqah felt that people respect her *more* because of her Muslim status markers.

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I was working in midtown Manhattan, and I was working as a buyer's associate

for a clothing store in the business department. When I first converted I wore

niqab, I covered my face because this is what I thought Muslim women should

do, and I was working there and the head of the company, he was Jewish, and

every day on the phone to Israel, but when I came in and I'd changed my clothing,

he saw that and he said, "I really admire you for wanting to make something of

your life." I didn't get any flak from him. When his receptionist had to go on

maternity leave, he asked me to take her place. So, the executive office, with my

niqab, to this Jew [laughs]. I don't know why I told you that [laughs]!

Siddiqah no doubt told me this story because she knew it defied expectations. Whereas the

presence of religious markers—perhaps especially the black face veil she had worn off and on

over the years—would normally provoke discrimination, Siddiqah experienced the opposite. Her

Jewish boss did not hold her appearance against her, but seemed to have celebrated her

conviction to live her faith. Despite her insistence that she does not experience discrimination for

being a Muslim, Siddiqah did admit that the 2016 Trump presidential campaign had been met

with a normalization of "racism and bigotry…because he's condoning it." However, she also felt

that whatever ill will some harbor toward Muslims, the phenomenon of what she called "Trump

Time" had sparked a backlash *against* Islamophobia.

Personally I feel like people have been more kind and even going out of their way

to be kind, and letting people know that "No, we're not about that." That's what

I've come across here.

Siddiqah felt that, in the months since the 2016 election, Americans had been especially

sympathetic toward her because of her Muslim status markers. Whereas white women

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encountered a decline in status when wearing these markers—and with it, a newfound experience of discrimination—these black women provided mixed responses. Some felt that religious markers increase their marginalization, while others reported the opposite, sometimes getting more respect from non-Muslims, such as black men.

The experiences of ethnoracialization described by the women of color in this section follow no single pattern like those of white women. Instead, their lives as visibly Muslim women are characterized by more complex social dynamics. Aminah is easily discernible as an immigrant by her accent, and felt that this shaped her experiences more profoundly than her wearing a hijab. Her experience was contrasted by Provi, who was also black Hispanic, also wore hijab, but spoke with an American accent. Non-Hispanic black women reported both facing Islamophobia and, remarkably, feeling that their social status was elevated as a result of being recognized as Muslim. Aysha mentioned the place of Islam in African American history, yet this would not explain why she and Siddiqah both felt they were held in higher regard by whites as well. Considering the extent to which these women cover their bodies—head-to-toe black abayas and hijabs—I suspect that they are mistaken for immigrants and therefore not associated with the same stereotypes that plague African Americans, but rather the more positive appraisals that white Americans hold about black immigrants (Waters 1999).

Putting Others at Ease

Respondents who were racialized by their status markers spoke not only of the myriad forms of discrimination they faced, but also the ways they handled and responded to this discrimination. Because Muslim status markers are so imbued with negative connotations, converts must sometimes engage in a specific kind of impression management: responding to

"stereotype threat" (Steele and Aronson 1995) by showing others they are not dangerous. They reported situations in which they sensed other people were uncomfortable with their appearance and so made an effort to put them at ease. In doing so, they also attempted to reaffirm to others that they were American. Leah provided an excellent example of this impression management:

> You know, honestly, with some people I feel like it's almost like I'm a traitor. Like I'm a traitor to all Americans because I believe in Allah. And with other people it's like they treat me very uncomfortably, like they are very uncomfortable with me until I start talking and then they're like, "Oh, she's American!" And then I say something that's like, maybe not the most "Muslim" thing to say, and sometimes I do that—like I'll say something that I normally wouldn't say, just to make the other person not uncomfortable. To tell them, "Yeah, I'm still American. I'm wearing this [abaya], but I'm still American." The other day, I don't know if you saw the news, the picture about Donald Trump the comedian did [Kathy Griffin tweeted an image of her holding "Trump's" severed head]. Obviously I'm against that. I may not like Donald Trump as a person, but I'm against that. So I was having a conversation with a woman and she kind of moved the conversation in that direction, like she was testing the water, and I felt like—even though I was against it—I felt like I had to be super, extremely against it. Otherwise it was going to look bad for Muslims; God forbid a Muslim thinks it's funny or something.

This insightful comment from Leah reveals the extent to which she and other converts work to put others at ease in their presence and to reaffirm that they are still their fellow Americans.

Kareem is a 67-year-old black veteran of the Vietnam War. He regularly dresses in a *thobe*, which resembles a white dress shirt but much longer. He also wears a kufi and has a Muslim style beard.[2] In addition, it is not uncommon for Kareem to dye his greying beard with henna, giving it a dark red appearance. He spoke about how others respond to his appearance at the Veterans Hospital he frequents.

> You know, I'm presently going back and forth to the VA. Again, being in
> Vietnam, Agent Orange and all that, so I have a claim, but I go over there like this
> [indicating that he wears a thobe and kufi]. I'm a very outgoing individual; if you
> look at me too long I'm going to make you speak to me. I went into the office,
> everybody's got American flags on their hats and jackets and they're looking at
> me like, "I was in Desert Storm, this guy looks like the guys we was fighting!"
> But I bring ease to them, "Hey man, how you doing? You alright? You want to go
> ahead of me?" You know, just to lighten it up a little bit, and just talk. You know,
> I'm as much an American as apple pie.

Knowing that he resembles "the enemy," Kareem makes it a point to reach out to those around him and show them he is no threat. Here he is not simply marked as an un-American "Muslim," but as threatening, "like the guys we was fighting." It is interesting that Kareem mentions the presence of American flags on the hats and jackets of his fellow veterans. Just as his thobe, kufi, and beard racialize him, their flag pins signal their commitment to a national identity, one that they have literally fought for, and which some see as threatened by Islam and Muslims. Both Leah and Kareem dress in ways that are unmistakably Muslim, and these status markers racialize them as dangerous, threatening, and un-American (Selod 2015). Because of this they experience stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995) and are mindful that they must reassure other

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Americans that they are not dangerous or threatening, and that they share many of the same values and attitudes. This finding is reminiscent of research by Hondagneu-Sotelo (2015:36), who found that Muslim advocacy organizations in California were "focuse[d] on educating the larger society, to show that they are American *and* Muslim" (emphasis in original). What those organizations are doing professionally, converts like Leah and Kareem seem to be working toward on their own.

Removing Religious Signifiers

Several converts had worn Muslim status markers in the past but stopped once they started experiencing problems. Others alternated between wearing them and not. Stephanie, introduced earlier, is one such convert, and was wearing a hijab at our interview. She had recently begun wearing it again after a hiatus of several months. Stephanie explained the incident that had previously convinced her to take off the hijab:

> And you know, when I realized I wasn't going to cover, it was right after the
> Orlando thing [Pulse Nightclub shooting]. Anyway, I was going to a kite festival,
> at a big park, and I'm going by myself, and I have a backpack with me. I have no
> children. It's a family event, everyone's there with their kids. I have no pet… I get
> out of my car and I'm like, "Oh my God, I might be scared of myself!" Here is a
> covered woman, walking down amongst all these families, nothing but a
> backpack. Why would I be doing that? That to me just looked… yeah, it's not
> gonna work. And after that I kind of changed things a little bit. I can't imagine
> how many people would have looked at me. I was the only single person there,
> I'm sure. Hundreds of people, everybody was there with somebody, at least a

boyfriend or a girlfriend. I had nothing. I just wanted to go see the kites! I just

wanted to get outside—the weather was beautiful and I wanted to walk around.

That was kind of one of my little turning points there. I was like, yeah, I can see

how people… they have a right to be concerned. All these things just happened.

It's not a realistic fear, but it's a fear they're allowed to have.

Stephanie has an on again, off again relationship with the hijab, as she is keenly aware that it

draws attention and possible associations with terrorism. Had she not been wearing a headscarf

during her visit to the kite festival, it may never have occurred to her—or to anyone else—that

her being a lone white woman with a backpack at the park should be a cause for concern.

Considering the problems and challenges involved with wearing religious status markers,

it is perhaps not surprising that some respondents chose not to wear them at all. These converts

provided a number of reasons why they do not feel comfortable wearing them, articulating their

desire to avoid the kinds of problems described above. For example, Chelsea, a 57-year-old

white woman, simply remarked that "It doesn't seem to fit in over here." Alexa, a 22-year-old

white graduate student, was eager to wear a hijab, just not in the United States. She felt that it

was too hard given the political tension both leading up to and following the 2016 presidential

election. Whereas Chelsea had little interest in wearing the hijab, Alexa felt like she cannot for

fear of discrimination.

Reracializing

Most of my female respondents—even those that did not wear hijab—expressed their

belief that the headscarf was religiously mandated, or at least preferred. Others gave more

nuanced responses. Mary, introduced earlier, hoped that by wearing hijab at work she would

promote a better image of her faith.

> Well at work around Ramadan I started wearing the hijab. I don't wear it all the
>
> time because of my family and I'm not totally used to it. But at work I wear hijab
>
> every day and as the marketing manager I'm the first face people see of our store.
>
> It's my way of showing people that Muslims are normal, we have everyday jobs,
>
> and were friendly and things like that.

 Leah expressed a similar sentiment:

> So we were going to a concert and I was wearing an abaya and hijab and he [my
>
> husband] told me I didn't have to dress that way, and I appreciate that he gave me
>
> an out if I wanted to take it, but I'm proud of myself for not taking it. He was like,
>
> "You don't have to wear this, just put a hat on or something else." I told him, "I
>
> have to do this; people have to see that we're normal." People have to see that I'm
>
> not some crazy extremist who hates them. They have to see that we're normal
>
> people and we do normal things. Until somebody can see that, they're not going
>
> to think positive of us. It could just be one person who saw me and was like, "Oh,
>
> that's cool, she's here." And not to mention it's like a rock concert, so it's like,
>
> "Wow, cool."

What Mary and Leah described could be understood as a kind of "reracialization" (Gans 2017),

in which Muslim women like themselves actively attempt to foster a more positive image of

Muslims by normalizing hijab in everyday life. Thus, as a response to the stereotype threat that

highly visible Muslim converts face, some respond by going out of their way to put non-Muslim

Americans at ease, at least one (Stephanie) removed her hijab for a time, while others actively try

to reracialize Muslim status markers by showing others that Muslims are "normal people [who] do normal things," much like Muslim advocacy groups promoting the message that Muslim Americans are indeed both Muslim and American as a way of fighting against negative stereotypes (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). Yet it is not only converts and professional advocacy groups that work to combat stereotype threat. Saher Selod (2018) observes that heritage Muslim Americans, already under surveillance by the state, subject themselves to self-surveillance. Selod argues that Muslim men are more likely to endure state surveillance (such as being on terrorist watch lists), causing them to "avoid discussing particular topics, such as religion or foreign policy, out of fear of being identified as a Muslim and associated or seen as sympathizing with terrorism (2018:116). Conversely, women are more likely to face public surveillance because of the hypervisibility of their hijabs. This combination of factors (low state surveillance, high public visibility) enables Muslim women to resist stereotypes and "represent Islam in a positive light in order to counter the stereotypes that have racialized them" (2018:101). The efforts of Muslim women to redefine the symbolism of the hijab, and the extent to which the hijab may already invoke *positive* associations is largely understudied by race scholars and deserves attention (see Alghafli et al. 2017; Al Wazni 2015; Tiba 2012).

Conclusion

Recognizing that the religion of Islam does not enjoy a "charter" status in American culture, and that white and black converts to Islam do not match the expected racial or ethnic category that Americans associate with Muslims, this study has explored the consequences incurred when Americans become Muslim. Findings suggest that converting to a non-charter (i.e., "non-American") religion that is regarded as threatening and dangerous, and also deeply

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racialized as belonging to Arab and South Asian immigrants, can incur consequences for these white and black converts. However, as this research has shown, simply converting is rarely enough to racialize these Americans as "Muslims." In order for that to occur, they must don the markers of Muslim status, such as hijabs, abayas, kufis, and thobes. In doing so, these converts not only announce their Muslim identity to others, they become imbued with negative stereotypes and sometimes face prejudice or discrimination. This holds especially true for white converts, who may experience a lowering of status and a troubling of their whiteness, lending support to previous research on white converts who wear Muslim status markers (Galonnier 2015; Moosavi 2015a). Black converts have more complex outcomes because they are already racialized in negative ways. Their blackness can at times complicate their racialization as Muslims, causing them to experience either a lowering or a raising of their status. Additionally, this research has also examined various ways that converts respond to their racialization, such as: a) putting others at ease; b) removing religious status markers; c) and trying to reracialize religious markers in a more positive way.

There is a stark difference in experiences between those converts that merely divulge their Muslim identity and those that wear Muslim status markers. White Muslim converts who wear religious markers—such as the hijab, abaya, kufi, thobe, etc.—are more readily recognized as Muslim than those who do not. Further, it is through these markers that they find themselves (ethno)racialized as members of a faith regarded as "medieval and dangerous, as well as hostile and threatening" (Said [1981]1997:157). This racialization problematizes their whiteness and American identity. This is more than just religious prejudice, as those converts divulging their Muslim identity to others but not wearing Muslim status markers are not likewise associated with the negative stereotype of "Muslim." But how best to understand the unique work that these

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religious markers do in othering white converts? Writing on the cultural reproduction of whiteness, Withers (2017:8) notes, "meanings of whiteness are conveyed through material cultural objects and practices." Likewise, meanings of non-whiteness may be conveyed through objects and practices that are uncommon among whites. I argue that Muslim status markers—when adorning white American bodies—become hyper-visible cultural objects signifying "non-whiteness" and "non-Americanness." These objects "mark" white Muslim converts, and announce their difference in a way that cannot be ignored by an ostensibly color-blind society. Again, it is not a Muslim identity that problematizes their whiteness, but rather dressing "like a Muslim."

An analogy may be found in the red hats worn by many supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump, emblazoned with his trademarked slogan: "Make America Great Again." A red MAGA hat announces to all in sight that the wearer is a Trump supporter, and by extension it is presumed—fairly or not—that the wearer is a willing associate of the xenophobia, racism, and sexism that characterized Trump's 2016 run for the presidency. In the right context, a red MAGA hat is a divisive symbol, and wearing one can be seen as an act of provocation, inviting negative encounters with strangers (Balsamini 2017). The sight of this hat supposedly conveys a lot of information about the person wearing it, their beliefs and values, and the ugliness they are willing to tolerate. Muslim status markers—perhaps especially the hijab—can function in the same way. They make clear to all around that the wearer is a Muslim, a religious identity that is not only perceived as non-American, but also associated with a great deal of ugliness in the world today (Alsultany 2007; Cainkar 2011; Jackson 2010; Love 2009). Thus, while a cultural object such as a red MAGA hat worn by a white person has come to symbolize white privilege or

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even white nationalism, Muslim status markers on white bodies may represent a forfeiting of whiteness.

While the above analysis may work in the case of whites, it does not adequately extend to people of color, as the racializing power of religious markers affects black and brown bodies differently than whites. Latino/a and black converts who don religious markers did speak about religious discrimination, however, white converts adopting them were much more likely to report facing discrimination, whereas people of color reported less. In fact, black women were some of the most "marked" respondents in my sample. They were more likely to wear long black abayas along with their hijabs than were white women, and some of them had worn face veils in the past. Yet they reported less discrimination, and even talked about gaining respect from others who recognized them as Muslim.

What to make of this apparent dichotomy? Race scholars have written extensively about the black/white divide in the United States (Lee and Bean 2007). George Yancy (2016:xxx) puts it succinctly when he writes, "…whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent, and the pure, while blackness is the diametrical opposite." Thus, several interpretations present themselves. First, many of the black converts interviewed for this study were in their 50s and 60s, meaning they would have had numerous opportunities to experience a considerable amount of discrimination in their lives, and may have grown a thick skin to the microaggressions that were new to white converts. A second, and related explanation, is that because these converts already face discrimination for being black, they have a shorter distance to fall on the racial hierarchy. Their bodies are already read as "not American" and therefore they experience less of a drop in status by donning Muslim status markers. A third interpretation is that many of these same respondents spend most of their time in Muslim centric social networks—some of

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them having worked at private Islamic schools for decades—meaning they may have fewer encounters with non-Muslim Americans and therefore fewer opportunities for discrimination, as they find themselves regularly surrounded by other Muslims who not only dress like they do, but hold the wearing of religious markers in high regard (see Alghafli et al. 2017; Al Wazni 2015; Tiba 2012).

Whether white, black, or brown, most of the converts experiencing ethnoracialization by religious markers were women. There are several reasons for this: first, women were overrepresented in my sample, accounting for nearly two-thirds of respondents. Second, they were also more likely to wear these markers, which made them more visible and identifiable as Muslims. Third, women generally hold less power in society, which makes them easier targets for discrimination. And fourth, women have traditionally been expected to transmit culture to the next generation. By changing religions (i.e., value systems [nonmaterial culture]) and changing the way they dress (i.e., material culture), these women defy those expectations and are subsequently sanctioned.

CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study of American Muslim converts has been to examine issues pertinent to the authenticity of their religious identities. Two basic avenues of inquiry were pursued: how it is that they talk about themselves, especially when giving an account of their conversion to Islam, and how they feel about their time among heritage Muslims, especially considering the racial, ethnic, or cultural differences between themselves and heritage Muslims. The first data chapter was devoted to a consideration of how they talk about themselves, while the second and third data chapters went into the complexities of their experiences with heritage Muslims and non-Muslim Americans, especially how these experiences were shaped by both their racial identities and their adoption of "Islamic" style clothing. In each case, the axis around which these chapters revolve is a consideration of whether and to what extent these converts are recognized as being authentically Muslim.

Chapter three focused on the way my interviewees talked about their conversion. Not the specific details of their stories, but the broader, overarching themes and motifs that these stories are premised upon, and what this can tell us about how these converts narratively construct their identities as authentic Muslims. While previous work on conversion narratives has sought to garner insight as to why people convert from one faith to another, and in doing so looked for mechanisms of causality, this chapter has taken a different route altogether. My approach is premised on the understanding that social actors use pre-established, widely circulated, and immediately recognizable narratives, similar to formula stories, to organize the otherwise

variegated bits and pieces of their lives into meaningful, understandable patterns. This approach provides insight by examining the narrative structures these converts rely upon to tell the story of their conversion, not of the specifics of how and why they converted, but of the cultural codes and social logic upon which their story is predicated. In other words, I was interested in the assumptions and shared meaning and values upon which their stories were based. Examining these broader dimensions has much to tell us about how social actors construct their identities when accounting for profound life changes. In addition, the narrative analytic approach employed in this chapter provided clues as to the extent and adhesiveness of their acquired religious identity.

Previous research employing a narrative analytic approach to religious conversion narratives has identified a prominent and seemingly catchall formula story: the awakening narrative. Awakenings tell of profound change, "from darkness to light," as it were. To a perhaps lesser extent, some converts have been found to employ a continuity narrative, a story not of change but of having "always been this way." A close reading of my interviewees' own conversion narratives found that both of these narrative structures were at work. Further, my analysis uncovered a third narrative, what I call the *return narrative*. Returns as employed by my respondents are characterized by a belief that each person is born Muslim, but then is raised by their parents to be Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, atheist, etc. In "converting," one simply returns to their original, pristine, unadulterated, and uncorrupted state of being. This final narrative structure is especially notable as it is easily adapted to Islamic teachings about the nature of humanity.

The return narrative shares some aspects with both the awakening and continuity stories, yet remains distinctly different. Like awakenings, returns involve a profound or dramatic change

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to the convert. Yet unlike awakenings, the change undergone by a returner is not to a new religion, but rather a journey home to the original faith to which they initially belonged. Further, the awakening narrative is commensurate with the Christian concept of salvation through Christ, in which all humans are born with original sin and therefore in need of the atoning work of Christ. In other words, a profound change is necessitated to move the individual from "damned" to "saved." In Islamic theology there is no doctrine of original sin, and thus no need for atonement. This suggests that, at least in the case of Islamic conversion narratives, the awakening and return narratives are premised on fundamentally different conceptions of human nature.

Likewise, the return and continuity narratives hold important similarities and differences. Both suggest that humans have a kind of innate religiosity, and that conversion is perhaps less a change toward becoming religious, and more a matter of recognizing and accepting the "light" within. Conversion is therefore not a change in one's true self, but rather a re-articulation of that true self having now acquired the appropriate language (i.e., religion). Despite this, the innate religiosity to which the convert "returns" is distinctly Islamic and therefore not transposable to other religious traditions. Another point of similarity examined is the apparent continuity of (dis)belief expressed by some of my interviewees using continuity or return narratives. I found respondents using a variation of the continuity formula story that I have called the *paradoxical continuity narrative*, in which converts maintained that they never truly believed in Christianity (and thus their conversion was one of no or limited change), while simultaneously using the proximity of Christian and Islamic beliefs to both appropriate the former's credibility and to establish their own continuity of belief. The return narrative neutralizes the confusion of "I never believed Christianity because it is 'wrong,' *and* Islam is 'right' because of its similarity to

Christianity," and effectively translates it into "I never believed the 'wrong' parts of Christianity, but always believed the 'right' ones." The key distinction being that the return narrative is rooted in Islamic theology, which holds that Islam itself is a return to the original religion of Abraham, of which Christianity and Judaism are seen as divergences. Hence, Islam is regarded as a return to the Abrahamic faith, not a continuity of Judeo-Christian belief. Likewise, the return narrative frames converting to Islam in the same manner.

Further, the return narrative itself is contradictory, as it posits not a convert, but a "revert." A revert is, aptly enough, one who returns to their previous religion rather than converts to a new one. Yet this term obscures the distinction between conscious and unconscious competence. If we are all born Muslim as the return narrative suggests, then we are so unconsciously, yet when an individual chooses to become Muslim they do so consciously. Thus, one never truly "reverts." However, this apparent contradiction is not considered so in the social logic of Muslim communities. On the contrary, referring to oneself as a "revert" communicates the extent to which one has internalized the Islamic dogma of fitra upon which the return narrative is predicated. And this is of course the underlying point of each story: to communicate the authenticity of the storyteller's identity. The formula story each convert employed was therefore reflective of two things: the trueness of their religious identity, and the thought community to which they belonged. Awakening stories indicated this trueness by emphasizing a real, meaningful change within the convert. Continuity stories indicated it by pointing to the lack of change, because they already disbelieved in the "falseness" of those parts of Christianity that most conflicted with Islam, such as the Trinity or divinity of Christ. And return stories likewise pointed to an authentically Muslim religious identity by framing their conversion as a reversion to their original state of being. Finally, the thought community to which each interviewee

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belonged was indicated by the cultural codes and social logic they drew upon when relating their conversion story.

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Chapter four examined the intersections of race and religion in the lives of American Muslim converts. Specifically, the chapter explored the question of authenticity, or Muslimness, for these converts by examining the ways that their racial identities hindered them in acquiring this authenticity. I have argued that although white converts sometimes experienced favorable treatment at the hands of heritage Muslims, they, along with black converts, were sometimes made to feel like they were less authentically Muslim. White converts usually experienced this in situations in which they were infantilized and patronized, while for black converts it usually took the form of racism or otherwise rude treatment. The end result was that these converts sometimes felt as if they did not belong, and indeed could not belong in the same way that heritage Muslims did. Some interviewees lamented the idea, implicit in the heritage Muslim communities they had joined, that Muslimness is something that heritage Muslims naturally possess—that it is inherent to them regardless of their knowledge or practice of the faith. This is commensurate with the fact that, in the U.S. context, Islam is a racialized religion in that it is primarily associated with Arabs/Middle Easterners and, to a lesser extent, South Asians from India or Pakistan. Thus, heritage Muslims who have immigrated from these parts of the world, and by extension their U.S. born children, are imbued with Muslimness in a way that converts cannot match. At the same time, most converts in the U.S. are black, while others are white or Latina/o. I have argued that the incongruity between the racial identities of converts in my sample and the racial and cultural makeup of predominately heritage Muslim communities and social networks creates a perception of illegitimacy for these converts, marking them as less authentically Muslim. These

findings highlight the central role of race in Muslim identity—at least within an American context.

Additionally, the role of race in shaping their experiences, and by extension in determining who is and who is not a true Muslim, was invoked by half of my respondents, necessitating its central place in my analysis. Roughly one-third of whites did so, which is notable considering the tendency of whites to remain largely oblivious to the role of race in their own lives. Regardless of whether or not they viewed or spoke about their experiences using the language of race, many of these white respondents had experiences in which they were sometimes held in high regard, while at other times were treated as though they did not belong, constituting a phenomenon that I have referred to as *white duality*. Conversely, black converts reported no such favoritism, and, on the contrary, claimed to face racism on par with that of the larger society. Latino/a and Hispanic converts reported experiences that were characteristic of white and black converts, but rarely did they speak of anything that could be directly attributed to their ethnicity. Some of the Hispanic whites I interviewed passed as non-Hispanic white and reported experiences similar to those of non-Hispanic whites, while those that were black Hispanic described encounters and incidents commensurate with the experiences of non-Hispanic black converts. There was no immediately recognizable difference.

Finally, I have referred to the tendency for American Muslim communities to reproduce Arab-centric forms of belief and practice as *Arab conformity.* My research found a difference in experiences, especially a reduction in challenges to their Muslimness, reported by interviewees who embraced Arab conformity such as by adopting certain forms of Islamic dress and/or demonstrating a proficiency with the Arabic language. However, there was considerable disagreement among converts as to the extent to which such efforts were successful or even

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desirable. Two black Hispanic interviewees felt that Arab conformity contradicted, and even devalued, their Hispanic background. These sentiments were not based on specific negative encounters, but rather what they perceived as a clash of norms and values.

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Chapter five turned attention away from interactions occurring within heritage Muslim communities and refocused it on the experiences of converts among the non-Muslim majority. Particular attention was given to the marked distinction in experiences between those converts who chose to wear Muslim status markers and those who did not. Converts wearing these status markers were racialized as "Muslim" and subsequently associated with negative stereotypes, and at times were subjected to discrimination. This was especially true of white women who had begun wearing the hijab, only to find that doing so "raced" their bodies differently than what they had previously experienced. Those who did not wear these status markers, even if they divulged their Muslim identity to non-Muslims, were not confronted with the same problems.

Further, there were clear differences by race in terms of how wearing Muslim status markers racialized these converts. White and white Hispanic converts were sometimes made to feel like they were no longer American, or even that they were dangerous or threatening. Black and black Hispanic converts had more complex experiences. They were already negatively racialized before putting on Muslim status markers, and therefore did not necessarily experience the same drop in status as did white converts. Conversely, some black interviewees reported garnering more respect after donning these status markers, especially among the black community where Islam itself is more highly revered than in the larger society. Additionally, the findings of this chapter dealt primarily with the experiences of women, both because the hijab

they wore is such a visible symbol of Muslim identity, and because women were overrepresented in my sample and also more likely than the men to dress "Islamically."

Converts responded to these challenges in several ways. Some would go out of their way to put other people at ease by showing them that although they may appear different because of the way they dress, they are still relatable as fellow Americans, and further, they are not dangerous or threatening. Some converts, aware of the negative scrutiny they may face for donning Muslim status markers, had chosen not to do so, while a few had either initially worn them but since stopped, or alternated between wearing them or not. A few were actively trying to reracialize these markers. They wanted to change cultural assumptions about Muslims by, for example, being seen wearing hijab in locales or contexts they thought might challenge stereotypes or otherwise normalize these Islamic symbols in everyday life.

Beyond these more descriptive elements of how Muslim status markers racialize the wearer, chapter five also provided an analysis as to why this is the case. I have argued that in the case of white converts, the presence of these status markers problematizes their whiteness. This occurs for two reasons: first, markers such as the hijab are thoroughly imbued with racialized meanings related to Muslim and Arab men and women (such as terrorist, oppressed, etc.), which seemed to suggest to some non-Muslim Americans that the wearer is embracing such connotations. And second, wearing markers such as the hijab also means not wearing cultural forms of dress associated with Americans or white Americans specifically, and therefore symbolically rejecting American culture and values. Thus, converts wearing these markers may be perceived as both rejecting American values and embracing Islamic ones.

More importantly, wearing Muslim status markers "marks" white converts' otherwise "unmarked" bodies. This is seen as problematic because it disrupts whites' pretensions to living

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in a color-blind society, while also disrupting the racial hierarchy. The disruption is caused by white converts intentionally forfeiting their whiteness by marking themselves as "Muslim," and therefore "foreign" and "other." Black converts who wore Muslim status markers had less to say about being negatively racialized by them. I attribute this to several things: first, they are already racialized in a negative way. This means that some of them, particularly the older ones, may have developed a thicker skin to some of the microaggressions that were new to white converts. Second, since they occupied a lower place in the racial hierarchy, these black converts had less to lose by wearing these markers. A third reason is that Islam already held a unique status within the black community. Since these converts spend more time within black social networks they are more likely to encounter people who think well of Islam, and or have friends or family members who are also Muslim.

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Implications

The core findings of this study can be succinctly summarized as follows: [1] Muslim converts use formulaic stories to talk about their own unique experiences of converting, yet each story serves the same purpose of communicating the sincerity of their conversion and the authenticity of their new social identity as Muslims; [2] Muslim converts' racial identities present a barrier to their being recognized as authentically Muslim within heritage Muslim spaces, yet those who adapt to the ethnoreligious norms of their chosen religion seem to be regarded as more authentic; [3] The very actions that grant Muslim converts greater authenticity within heritage Muslim communities can incur prejudice and discrimination outside of those spaces. White converts who "look like Muslims" face racialization and a troubling of their whiteness, while black and Hispanic converts may face a lowering or raising of their status

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depending on the social context. These findings can be further explored for their implications regarding some of the concepts invoked in the opening chapter's literature review.

For example, social identity theory tells us that categorical identities (such as race, gender, age, etc.) gain or lose salience depending on the context in which social actors find themselves. My findings are congruent with this theory in that the converts I spoke to found that their race or ethnicity set them apart from most members of their adopted Muslim communities, limiting their ability to achieve authentically Muslim identities. Further, my findings suggest that being recognized as an authentic Muslim involves acquiring the appropriate ethnoreligious capital. Since this capital is largely embodied in heritage Muslims—racially, ethnically, and nationally—and converts themselves are imbued with the "wrong" capital (i.e., whiteness, blackness), they must resort to "dressing like a Muslim." Put differently, they must adopt the religious signifiers that connote stereotypical Muslimness. In their work on racial authenticity in transracial families, Goss et al. (2017:150) claim that researchers have paid scant attention to investigating how people who find themselves in "paradoxical social positions" may "transform stereotypes into enabling resources" of racial authenticity. In other words, rather than avoid the cultural elements regarded as stereotypical of a racial group (à la "stereotype threat"), some people embrace them as a matter of establishing an authentic racial identity. My findings represent a contribution to this gap in the literature, as they demonstrate how the adoption of certain symbols (i.e., Muslim status markers) and behaviors (e.g., speaking Arabic) could mitigate the salience of Muslim converts' racial or ethnic difference by signaling their belonging to heritage Muslim communities.

My research also contributes to our understanding of the connections between racial and religious authenticity. Charme (2000) divides Jewish understandings of authenticity into two

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categories: "essentialistic" and "existential." The first may be thought of as authenticity through cultural identity, the second as authenticity through individualism. Essentialistic authenticity is a kind of inherent quality of the larger Jewish community and tradition in the long durée. Individual Jewish people are therefore "instantiation[s]" of the authentic Jewish community, wherein "The politics of authenticity merge with the politics of identity" (Charme 2000:135-140). This most closely resembles my argument that heritage Muslims are authentically Muslim because of their belonging to the larger Muslim community. However, my argument differs in that I hold Muslimness for heritage Muslims to be a result not of their adherence to tradition or community, but of their ethnoreligious capital. In other words, their having the "right" racial, ethnic, and national background.

Conversely, the second variety, existential authenticity, derives from not adhering to group norms but rather from "Self-realization and self-actualization" (Charme 2000:140). This post-modernist notion of authenticity is achieved through individualism, and allows for social actors to draw upon various social identities, including race or ethnicity, in constructing an authentic self. Neither type of authenticity is available to the converts I interviewed. Their Muslimness is predicated on outside forces: specifically, the racial dynamics of heritage Muslim communities and the broader U.S. society. Although their Muslim identities are self-chosen and achieved, their being regarded as authentically Muslim is not up to them. Converts must acquire Muslimness through performance. As such, any challenge to this performance, such as in the examples that my interviewees recounted in chapter four, is therefore a challenge to the authenticity of their Muslim identity.

Further, my research focus on the incongruence of a white or black racial identity with a Muslim religious identity is useful to scholars who wish to better understand how race and

religion are mutually informative categories. This topic has received renewed interest in recent years, and my findings provide an informative case. By conceptualizing racial and religious identities as cultural codes—evaluative templates that tell us something about social actors and the social world—we are equipped with a powerful tool to understand the interpretations and expectations we have for these identities. In other words, although Muslims are real people living real lives, people tend to think about them using abstractions. By interrogating these abstractions the building blocks that comprise them become clear. More specifically, the cultural code of "Muslim" is comprised of building blocks that are not only religious, but also racial, ethnic, and national. Once a cultural code like "Muslim" is unpacked, the deep-rooted ties between these social identity categories are made known. Scholars wishing to further explore the mutually informative relationship between race and religion would do well to adopt Muslims and Muslim converts as subjects of analysis.

A necessary first step in understanding race and religion as mutually informative of each other is to appreciate the difference between conceptualizing Islam as a "racialized religion" rather than an "ethnic religion." Hammond and Warner (1993) use the term "ethnic religion" to refer to a religion in which membership is predicated on each member belonging to a particular ethnic group. Given the close relationship between Islam and the peoples and cultures of the Middle East—not to mention the difficulties and challenges to authenticity that black and white converts to Islam face within heritage Muslim communities—one may speculate that Islam itself is an ethnic religion. There does appear to be a considerable amount of policing of who is a real Muslim and who is a perpetual newcomer, and my findings strongly suggest that black converts face greater exclusion than whites. However, Islam does not discourage conversion of non-Middle Eastern peoples, and none of my interviewees suggested that they were in any way

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discouraged by heritage Muslims from converting—quite the contrary in most cases. Further, my findings suggest that the policing of Islam's borders also occurs outside Muslim communities, and has as much to do with larger social forces, especially race relations, as it does with heritage Muslim communities themselves. This is especially evident in my finding that the larger U.S. society appears to be more disapproving of white conversion than black, as it disrupts the white/non-white boundary.

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Future Research

At least half of the interviewees for this study attended the same mosque. Many of the negative experiences they reported had either taken place within this mosque, or within spaces on the adjoining grounds, or at least among other members of this community. Though it is a multiethnic congregation, mosque leadership is primarily Arab (Mahmood 2016), and it is worth investigating how Muslim converts at mosques with different leadership may have different experiences. Future research may wish to investigate the possibility that converts joining communities less characterized by Arab conformity may be met with different experiences, such as less black exclusion and white duality. Comparisons could be made among converts attending mosques that are primarily Arab, primarily South Asian, or primarily multiethnic. Further, researchers may wish to consider studying congregations lead by converts to investigate the extent to which congregational and/or leadership characteristics mitigate racial and ethnic differences within the community.

Another possible means of mitigating such difference is marriage to a heritage Muslim. A number of the converts interviewed, especially women, were married to heritage Muslims. Although I did not inquire as to the details of these marriages, several interviewees offered their

impressions of what may be referred to as the politics of marriage in heritage Muslim communities. Several black women stated that heritage Muslim men had a clear preference for white converts, as evidenced by white women allegedly having an easier time finding a husband within the community after their conversion. The white women who broached this topic took a different stance, claiming that heritage Muslim men had a preference for other heritage Muslim women, especially from their or their parents' country of origin. Additionally, a few women suggested that their being married to a heritage Muslim man had facilitated their being recognized as more authentically Muslim. Research on Muslim American marriage has found that although Muslims "prefer their own racial group" (Grewal 2009:336), more religious Muslims prefer to marry other religious Muslims of any race (Al-Johar 2005; Grewal 2009), whereas non-religious Muslims tend to prefer non-Muslim Americans (Al-Johar 2005).

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1) Tell me what was going on in your life when you became a Muslim. How did you come to Islam?

    a) Around what age converted?
    b) How long ago the conversion took place?
    c) How converted (specific reason)?

2) How important is Islam to you? How does that come through in your day to day life?

    a) Daily prayer?
    b) Mosque attendance?
    c) Something else?

3) Do you feel like your relationships with family and friends have changed? If so, can you talk about that?

    a) Do family/friends know?
    b) How did they respond?
    c) Any trouble telling people?

4) Have you ever felt like you had to choose between being Muslim and being American? If so, can you tell me more about that?

    a) Stated a preference?
    b) Who/what makes them feel this way?

5) In your experience, how do you think other Muslims view converts? How do you think they view you?

    a) Positive or negative impression of converts?
    b) How they are viewed/treated?
    c) Any examples?

6) Have you ever felt discomfort among other Muslims regarding how you practice Islam?

    a) Specific challenge?
    b) Specific affirmation?

7) Have you ever felt challenged by other Muslims about your understanding of the teachings of Islam?

    a) Specific challenge?
    b) Specific affirmation?

8) Can you tell me about a time when another Muslim made you feel like you weren't accepted or were treated with less respect? Why do you think this happened?

    a) Who made them feel unaccepted?
    b) Why do they think this happened?

9) How about the opposite? Have you ever felt like other Muslims favored you? Why do you think this happened?

    a) Who favored them?
    b) Why do they think they were favored?

10) Do you think that converts play a role as a bridge between Muslim communities and the wider U.S. society? Do you feel like this applies to your own life?

    a) If yes, how so?
    b) If no, why not?

9/28/2016

Patrick Casey
Sociology
2310 University Lake Dr. #103
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#:   Pro00027883

Title: American Converts to Islam: Building Bridges, Forging Bonds

Study Approval Period: 9/26/2016 to 9/26/2017

Dear Mr. Casey:

On 9/26/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

Casey, Study Protocol.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

Consent Form.docx.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may

review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR
56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson

USF Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

 Pro # 0 0 0 2 7 8 8 3

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

American Converts to Islam: Building Bridges, Forging Bonds

The person who is in charge of this research study is Patrick M. Casey**.** This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. He is being guided in this research by James C. Cavendish.

The research will be conducted at various locations in Tampa, FL, such as respondent's homes, coffee shops, public parks, etc.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Muslim Americans in general and Muslim converts in particular. I have chosen a set of survey and interview questions designed to help me gain the knowledge and insight necessary to better understand what it means to be a convert to Islam in America. Your involvement in this project is vital, for without your willing participation, these issues will remain understudied, unexplored, and misunderstood. In particular, at a time of heightened Islamophobia and religious mistrust, this study of Muslim converts in the U.S. seeks to investigate the role of converts in building bridges between Muslim communities and the broader American society.

Why are you being asked to take part?

I am asking you to take part in this research study because you are a convert to Islam and you live in the U.S.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

Take part in a onetime face-to-face interview of approximately one hour in duration. A voice recorder will be used to record the interview.

Answer questions about your experiences as a convert to Islam, especially your experiences with other Muslims.

Fill out a brief questionnaire asking for demographic information (i.e. age, education, gender, race, etc.)

Agree to be interviewed at a time and place of your choosing and convenience.

Agree to the use of a tape recorder at the time of the interview.

If you agree to being recorded, please be aware that the Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor are the only ones who will have access to this recording. These recordings will be kept under lock and key in the Principal Investigator's office. No information that identifies you will be kept. No identifying information will be used to label the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed (i.e. electronically deleted) 5 years after completion of this study.

Total Number of Participants

About 40 individuals will take part in this study at all sites.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Benefits

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest in my performing this research.

Privacy and Confidentiality

I will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff.

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research.

- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

I may publish what I learn from this study. If I do, I will not include your name. I will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Patrick M. Casey at 832-434-2658.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

_____
_____
Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent