RACE IN THE LIVES OF WHITE AUSTRALIAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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A NOTE ON THE USE OF 'CONVERT' AND 'REVERT'

Throughout this thesis I use the term 'convert' to refer to participants, in keeping with the standard language set by the literature. You may note that some participants use the word 'revert' when speaking about themselves. The term 'revert' is used by some people within the Muslim community as a preferable term to convert due to the belief that it better invokes the idea that all human beings are born with an innate and primordial inclination towards Islam.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the lived experiences of white Australian converts to Islam, and analyses the impacts of racialisation on white converts in a national context where Islam is broadly racialised as 'non-white,' and constructed as oppositional to the Australian nation. This research moved beyond previous sociological literature that deals with macro-level racialisation of Muslims deployed through institutions, legislation and policy, social structures and national discourses, to detail how racialisation is reproduced and experienced in everyday interpersonal encounters by white converts who move from an 'unraced' or invisible racial positioning to a highly racialised one. Qualitative data for this research were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty-nine self-identified white converts to Islam from Sydney, and underwent thematic analysis.

This project makes substantial empirical contributions to research about Australian Muslim communities and converts in particular, and contributes to broader knowledge about the racialisation of Islam and Muslims in Australia through its discussion of the racialised frames through which white converts are understood. In interactions with non-Muslims, this was done by explicitly framing Islam as a non-white race, or through the more subtle approach of constructing Islam as antagonistic to the Australian nation, which is underpinned by a national construction of whiteness. Importantly, interviews with white converts revealed that non-white Muslims also had dualistic and reified perceptions of Islam and whiteness that constructed Islam as incompatible with whiteness, which led some non-white Muslims to either question participants' commitment to the religion or conversely, glorified them for having the will to 'abandon' their whiteness for Islam.

The thesis additionally contributes to the sociology of race and the sociology of religion in Australia by highlighting how the production of contemporary Australian nationalism vis-à-vis the concurrent evocation of whiteness and Christian-coded secularism serves to position Islam as a religion that is not just antithetical to the Australian way of life, but to whiteness itself. These findings make an important contribution to the sociology of whiteness and national identity, which has not dealt sufficiently with the secular dimension of whiteness. It is hoped that this thesis aids in deepening and extending current theoretical understandings of racialisation, and of the operation of whiteness and Christian-coded secularism in the construction of Australian national identity.

CHAPTER ONE

SITUATING THE WHITE MUSLIM CONVERT

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, media commentators and scholars have alluded to the idea that we live in a post-racial world (Dawson & Bobo 2009; Rich 2013). In both academic and popular discourse, Barack Obama's 2008 election as the first Black President of the United States was heralded by many as *the* key marker of the post-racial moment. It was a symbol that the United States of America had successfully solved its 'race problem'; a sign that racial prejudice and inequality had been relegated to the nation's history books. As President Obama took the stand to give his inaugural address on January 20 2009, a collective sigh of relief gently rippled across the country. There had been no riots, no attempted assassinations and no revolution of outraged white people desperate to reclaim power. Black America was jubilant and exuberant (Dawson 2011). The United States of America had its first Black President, and the United States of America had remained intact.

Eight years on, as we approach the end of Obama's second term as President, commentaries in support of post-racialism as a political reality in the United States appear to have been overshadowed by the voices of its detractors (Dawson 2011, Goldberg 2013; Lentin 2014, 2015). In his chapter titled "The Postracial Contemporary," eminent critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg asks: "Are we postracial yet?" and immediately answers himself: "Hell, no, the evidence screams back" (2013, p. 16). "The evidence," he states, is clear - the rise of racial segregation in housing and education in the United States, significant

and structural racialised disparities of wealth in South Africa, and systemic racism in policing and immigration policies in Europe, all speak loudly and clearly to the fact that race continues to have significant social and material relevance.

Alongside the examples offered by Goldberg, we are also seeing a growing body of empirical and theoretical work documenting the racialisation of Muslims in white-dominant, Western nations such as the United Kingdom (Kyriakides et al 2009, Meer & Modood 2009; Moosavi 2015a, 2015b), the United States of America (Joshi 2006; Selod & Embrick 2013), Canada (Nagra 2011), France (Galonnier 2015) and Australia (Poynting et al 2004; Dunn et al 2007; Humphrey 2007). What this literature illustrates is that rather than race receding from public life, as a post-racial politic would suggest, it continues to have as much resonance and relevance as before. For Muslims, racialisation in a post-9/11 climate is manifest in institutional and interpersonal Islamophobia, increased surveillance of Muslim communities, and constant and repeated demands from Western governments that their Muslim constituents 'prove' their allegiance to the state - famously captured by former Prime Minister of Australia Tony Abbott's statement that "everyone has got to be on team Australia," a directive that was widely perceived to be directed at Muslims (quoted in Sydney Morning Herald 2014).

It is from within this political climate that my research on the post-conversion experiences of white converts to Islam emerges. On the one hand, we are told that we are living in a post-racial world where race is no longer a relevant element of identity; on the other, racialisation is encroaching into areas that some argue were not previously thought to be racialised, such as religion, and particularly Islam. White converts to Islam are implicated in both post-racial discourses and the argument that Islam is a racialised religion, which is why

they are the focus of this thesis. As posited by scholars of whiteness studies, whiteness is an 'unraced race' which is experienced by white people as a racially neutral identity (Dyer 1997, p. 70); its only presence is in the silence that surrounds it. Whiteness is anchored to race through the notion of its very *racelessness*, a concept which Goldberg states is at the heart of the postracial, along with the colourblindness of the US Civil Rights movement and the nonracialism of anti-apartheid (Goldberg 2013, p. 17). But white Muslim converts are also Muslim, and as this thesis will illustrate, the category of Muslim is far from raceless. White converts thus occupy an ambiguous and conflicted social location, but one that can help us to better understand the operation of both whiteness and racialisation in Australian society. Unlike non-white Muslims in Australia who have always experienced life as racialised individuals, and unlike white 'born Muslims' who identified as Muslim from childhood, white converts have the unique ability to discuss their lived experiences of race as a white Muslim and a white non-Muslim. This thesis thus centres the narratives of white converts to Islam through a thematic analysis of twenty-nine in-depth interviews with white Muslim converts in Sydney, Australia. Relying on the rich data that originated from the interviews, I argue that far from living in a post-racial society, the experiences of white converts to Islam demonstrate that racialisation continues to play a prominent role in Australian society and other Western societies, as illustrated by the construction of Muslims as a racialised group historically and contemporarily.

1.2 Research aims and contributions

This research project explored how white Muslim converts in Australia experience race and negotiate their racial identity post-conversion, and in doing

so analysed the racialisation of Islam and Muslims in Australia and its reproduction in everyday interpersonal interactions experienced by the white Muslim converts I interviewed. In order to operationalise my broader visions for this research project, I developed the following research aims:

1. To uncover the lived experiences of white converts to Islam post-conversion, as they relate to their understanding and experience of race, racism, whiteness, and privilege;

2. To contribute to the further theoretical development of the concept of racialisation, particularly as it relates to the racialisation of religious communities;

3. To evaluate the utility of using the concepts of racialisation and whiteness to understand Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice in an Australian context;

4. To analyse the presence of Christianity and whiteness in constructions of Australian citizenship and nationhood, and its implications for Australian Muslims.

Through the fulfilment of these aims, this research project makes innovative and significant contributions to the scholarly fields of religious conversion, whiteness and racialisation studies.

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. In this chapter, I introduce the subject matter and political context of my research project and outline my research aims. In the following chapter, Chapter Two, I position my research within the existing academic scholarship in the sociology of race and ethnic studies by

providing a critical review of the key literatures of a number of separate but interrelated fields that centre on race and racialisation. The first section of Chapter Two provides a brief summary of a number of seminal texts on racialisation, beginning with the work of Frantz Fanon, and ending with a more focused analysis of recent studies on the racialisation of Islam and Muslims. I then move to examine the literature on Islamophobia, and consider the assertion by scholars that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism. The final section, section 2.4, focuses on the relationships between whiteness and Christianity, whiteness and Australian nationhood, and Christianity and the Australian national imaginary. My review of the literature suggests that academic scholarship is increasingly interested in the notion that Muslims are racialised in Western nations like Australia that cohere around a Christian religious identity and a white racial identity, but that there is room for further theorisation of the phenomenon in addition to empirical studies. In this section, I highlight the way that my thesis engages with the sociology of religion in Australia. This chapter thus serves two primary functions: to map out the theoretical frameworks that guide and inform my analysis of the qualitative data in later chapters, and also to situate my research as a contribution to the existing literature in the sociology of race and ethnic studies and the sociology of religion.

In Chapter Three, I outline the methodological decisions I made in order to best operationalise the research aims described in this chapter, and outline the methods and research design used in the collection of data to meet my research aims. Central to the aims of my study was to uncover how white converts to Islam conceptualise their experiences of race prior to and after their conversion to Islam. My research thus required me to explore and document the experiences of white Muslim converts through an interpretivist process that

privileged depth, nuance and complexity, through narratives designed by the participants themselves. In-depth interviews allowed for such details to be captured, as they are based on the implicit idea that reality is socially constructed (Husserl 1965). This chapter also outlines my overall research philosophy, and offers a brief exploration of the question of how the quality of qualitative research can be assessed. In line with the findings of my review of the academic scholarship on this very topic, I attempt to be as transparent and 'auditable' as possible in this chapter by providing a comprehensive and detailed description of my research method, the limitations of my research project, and a reflection on the ethical considerations of my research project, including my own positionality as a non-white Muslim researcher.

Chapter Four is the first of my discussion chapters, centring on the conversion narratives of my research participants and the contexts in which their conversions took place. Chapter Four provides background knowledge about the participants' pre-conversion and conversion experiences, in order to provide a contextual framework for the reader to better understand their *post-conversion* experiences. This is done by first providing a review of the key literatures on religious conversion to Islam to date, and then focusing on three primary aspects of participants' pre-conversion lives: participants' religious identities prior to becoming Muslim, their contact with Muslims and knowledge of Islam, and their motivations or reasons for converting to Islam.

Chapters Five and Six attend to participants' post-conversion experiences and interactions. While Chapter Five is about converts' experiences with non-Muslims, Chapter Six focuses on their interactions with Muslims, an area that is currently under-researched in the conversion literature. Both of these chapters uncover a rich and substantial amount of data that indicates that both non-Muslims and Muslims are involved in racialising discourses that position

"Muslim" and "white" as dichotomous and incompatible categories. Within the broader non-Muslim community, white converts decision to convert to a religion that is seen as antithetical to Western values and beliefs either diminishes or eradicates their whiteness in others' eyes, or alternatively sees them labelled as race traitors who act against and destabilise the white race. White converts to Islam may also be constructed as un-Australian or even anti-Australian, and as culturally foreign.

Chapter Six highlights how the Muslim community also grapples with the concept of a white Muslim, because of the association made between whiteness and power, immorality, and cultural and spiritual vacuousness. White converts are thus sometimes treated with suspicion, or expected to prove their devotion to the religion through acts of piety. Alternately, some white converts express feeling that white converts were glorified, and their religious devotion assumed because the large cultural gap they had to bridge in order to become Muslim was perceived as a symbol of their spirituality and observance.

The final discussion chapter recentres the focus on how white converts to Islam think about race and whiteness, and how they negotiate their racial identities in the face of the racialised frames through which they are viewed. The findings of Chapter Seven suggest that amongst participants who were comfortable to talk about race and whiteness, converting to Islam either precipitated their cognisance, reinforced their perception of themselves as white, or made them feel 'less white' than they were previously. These responses often arose out of a combination of their interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims, as documented in Chapters Five and Six, and their own political, ideological and intellectual leanings. While some participants expressed their feelings of being a white Muslim through explicit references to race and whiteness, others did so through more indirect ways, by talking about their feelings of belonging and

exclusion, and their attitudes towards 'culture,' which was often seen through racialised lenses.

Chapter Eight, the concluding chapter, draws together the key findings of my research with reference to my research aims, as outlined earlier in this chapter. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

PERSPECTIVES ON RACIALISATION, RACISM AND WHITENESS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I situate my thesis in relation to the broad fields of scholarship that it straddles, with specific attention to the diverse range of sociological texts that study and dissect the concepts of race, racialisation and whiteness. While this thesis does engage with the sociological field of religion, with a particular focus on Islam and secularism, the religious dimension of the lives of the white converts interviewed is far less salient to the aims of the research project than the racial dynamic. In other words, this thesis is primarily concerned with religion as a conduit through which racialisation can occur.

In order to understand how racial meaning can be so readily extended to and projected upon a religious community, the way that religion is conceptualised in this thesis - primarily as a social marker of difference, with less attention to the substantive elements of Islam itself - needs to be briefly clarified, before attending to the primary analytical framework of racialisation. Functional approaches to religion have long asserted that religious affiliation plays a significant role in constituting and symbolising group identity, social cohesion, reinforcing communal borders, and providing 'believers' with a common moral framework (Chidester 1988, Durkheim 1965, Mitchell 2006, Yang 1997). The similarities between functional understandings of religion as a "dynamic between personal and group identification" (Mitchell 2006, p. 17), race and

ethnicity have been expounded upon in great detail by legal scholar Tseming Yang (1997), who contends that religion, race and ethnicity are "types of cultural groupings and consequently are important sources of self-definition; they serve as reference points of identity for an individual and others" (p. 128). Arguably, functional approaches to religion that de-emphasise the substantive elements of religion such as belief, practice and ritual, in favour of group belonging and social identification, more easily enables the conflation between religion, race and ethnicity, and allows for racialisation to occur more fluidly. Thus, in order to critically explore the racialisation dynamic, this thesis focuses on a functional approach to religion both in its theoretical framework and also methodologically, by recruiting participants based solely on their *identification* as 'Muslim' and affiliation to Islam, rather than asking about their specific religious beliefs and practices.

The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to building the key conceptual frameworks utilised by this thesis in later chapters through a critical review of a number of seminal and other relevant works in the areas of race, racialisation and whiteness.. A thorough inquiry of this literature is essential to this project – not only are there numerous ways in which these concepts can and have been understood, but they are also sometimes in conflict with one another. Finally, I will outline the key findings of research on religious conversion to Islam that have emerged from various Muslim-minority countries, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden and France.

2.2 Conceptualising Race and Racialisation

Since a comprehensive genealogy of race in the sociological literature cannot be provided in this thesis (due to constraints of time and length), this section will instead focus on works on racialisation alone. Racialisation has become a

common word in the sociological lexicon, the magnitude of its usage belying the relative newness of its coinage. One understanding of racialisation offered by American sociologists and race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant sees it as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group" (1994, p. 64). Writing from Britain, Robert Miles uses the word racialisation to refer to the "historical emergence of the idea of 'race' and to its subsequent reproduction and application" (1989, p. 76). Other descriptions suggest that racialisation most often occurs around perceived social problems, such as immigration and crime, which become associated with certain racial groups (Murji & Solomos 2005).

Criticism levelled at literature on racialisation by theorists such as David Goldberg (2005) and Clara Rodriguez (2000) can be attributed in part to the lack of agreement about the term. Goldberg (2005) and Rodriguez (2000) argue that the ambiguous nature of racialisation and the diversity of its application has led to the development of a theoretically weak body of work. Indeed, an appraisal of the variety of texts that employ the term racialisation does suggest the concept of racialisation has been over-used and under-theorised in the short duration of its academic existence, often employed as a normative fact rather than an analytical tool that may itself need interrogation. The rapidity of the term's spread across multiple disciplines, including those far removed from sociology, to apply to most any and every phenomenon known to humankind has been observed by several commentators, including British scholars of race and ethnicity Karim Murji and John Solomos who state in their introduction to the edited book on the topic, "What is in a word? When that word is racialisation, the short answer is a great deal and, perhaps, too much" (2005, p. 1).

Even a cursory glance at the literature illustrates racialisation has been applied to such varied topics as intimacy (Eng 2010), women's household work (Bakan & Stasiulis 1995), labour in the computer game World of Warcraft (Nakamura 2009), space (Lipsitz 2007), pregnancy (Bridges 2011) and white opinions on social security (Winter 2006). This is not to say that the above cited texts have used the concept of racialisation incorrectly or uncritically, but they do help to illustrate the latitude of its use in a number of disciplinary fields. A more generous assessment could perhaps just as easily argue that the span of this coverage simply demonstrates its utility and highlights the continued significance of race and racialisation today. Still, criticisms about the effectiveness of the term must be acknowledged and addressed. Goldberg's dissatisfaction with the term has led him to repudiate the use of the term at all, stating that "Quite often it is put to work simply to suggest race-inflected social situations, those informed or marked by racial characterization" (2005, p. 88) and that as a result the concept of racialisation is analytically bankrupt.

Despite such criticism, or perhaps because of it, the literature on racialisation continues to expand and evolve. This brief review of the literature acknowledges the challenges of adopting an idea that is as dynamic, contested and possibly analytically troublesome as racialisation, but believes that it is still important to come to a working understanding of the concept in order to better understand its operative function in society. This thesis further asks whether it is possible to define it and employ it in a way that invokes "deeper normative, critical thrust" (Goldberg 2005, p. 88), and attempts to do so in future chapters.

Before beginning this task, however, it is important to state that the word 'race' is used in this thesis to describe a political idea (Lentin 2004) that is culturally and socially constructed, historically contingent, but nonetheless has a material impact on people in the social world (Alcoff 2006), and thus remains a salient

category for examining people's lived experiences. Despite declarations that we live in a post-racial era, as I referred to in Chapter One, race continues to be an operative marker of identity in the social world. Physical and visibly apparent differences between people are still consistently drawn upon, not just to categorise and classify people into different but neutrally valued 'races,' but to project upon these categories social and moral meanings. When I use the word race in this thesis, I use it not as a fixed and immoveable scientific classification schema, but as a culturally bounded system of categorisation that affects a variety of aspects of people's lives including but not limited to life expectancy, educational and employment outcomes, and incarceration rates.

Race is thus employed in a critical and cautious way. It must be acknowledged too that some scholars in the field prefer that it not be used at all. In his original overview of racial theories published in 1987, British social scientist Michael Banton contended that the reliance of race on hierarchical and biologically determined categories which have long since been discredited in the natural and social sciences, meant race should be banished from the language of sociology. In the first edition of *Racial Theories,* Banton defined race primarily as a biological instrument that used 'science' to justify the treatment of black people as inferior and subservient to white people. His preoccupation with the biological aspect of race can be seen in his focus on race as lineage, type and subspecies, with lesser import placed on social, economic, and political factors that contributed to different understandings of race through the ages. Banton's emphasis on the pseudoscientific use of race has the effect of divorcing the concept of race from the historical contexts in which it has been used, and limits our ability to understand the continued existence of race in popular discourse. This is despite the fact that biological understandings of race are less likely to be invoked in this day, particularly in the social sciences.

Although the second edition of Banton's *Racial Theories* (1998) conceded that social constructions of race are an important category for sociology, through the addition of a concluding chapter on "Race as Social Construct," Banton (1998) insists that just as biological definitions of race eventually fell to disuse, so too will race disappear from the pages of sociology. Like Banton, Miles and Brown (2003) discouraged the use of race as an analytical concept, positing that it is not the criteria used for what defines a race but the very act of naming something as a race which is dangerous and leads to racism and racial superiority. Writing from a British context, Miles and Brown (2003) highlighted the highly politicised nature of racialisation, stating that there are no races but only the belief that there are races. These beliefs, they contended, are what cause some groups to "construct an Other (and therefore the Self) in thought as a prelude to exclusion and domination, and by other social groups to define Self (and so to construct an Other) as a means of resisting exclusion" (Miles & Brown 2003, p. 43). It is unsurprising then that Miles and Brown (2003), like Banton (1997), are more interested in a reduction in the usage of race as a sociological concept than in a broadening of the term.

Although I recognise the considerable contributions that Banton, Miles and Brown have made to the study of race and racism, I question whether simply refusing to entertain the concept of race will lead to its everyday abolition. It is particularly questionable whether abolishing the naming and categorisation of racial groups in line with liberal conceptions of equality will do away with institutionalised racism in structures, social systems and institutions, or whether it will simply allow for the same exclusion and domination to continue without providing a name for the source nor a remedy for groups suffering from racism. In the famous words of Colette Guillaumin, in reference to the legal inscription of race, "Race does not exist. But it does kill people" (2002, p.

107). simply stating that race has no biological basis does nothing to eradicate its sociocultural effects, and by refusing to use the concept serves to mask its impact on the lived experiences of racialised groups.

Instead of using the term race, Miles and Brown prefer to talk of 'racialisation.' Miles and Brown (2003) explicitly emphasise the importance of biological references in racialisation processes, describing it as a "dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons that reproduces itself biologically" (Miles & Brown 2003, p. 102). In his earlier book, *Racism*, Miles (1989, p. 84) stated that it is the biological features of a person that are used to determine collectivity, and then these and cultural features are negatively evaluated based on the socio-political context of the time. Their emphasis on the significance of physically apparent features on the face and body continues the line of thought that was begun by noted Martinician psychiatrist and philosopher of race Frantz Fanon, who Miles claims originated the term racialisation in a discussion about national culture – an assertion that is contested by Rohit Barot and John Bird's genealogy of racialisation (2001). However, even before Fanon started to use the *term* racialisation, he was already writing about *racialisation* in earlier genealogies of race. Writing about how Black people came to be imbued with racial characteristics in colonial societies, Fanon argued that the process of racialisation is integrally bound up in the body, produced through a racial-epidermal schema that imposes meanings onto the skin that are defined by the white gaze and the white imagination (1967, p. 92). In other words, Fanon contends that the ontological experience of epidermal difference, and the idea that that difference is constitutive of a 'black essence,' is produced through encounters with white people.

Beneath this racial-epidermal schema exists what Fanon calls a "historico-racial schema," or a package of myths about black inferiority that have been produced by "the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" (p. 91). Fanon describes these two schemas as two fundamental stages of racialisation. The body, as the foundation of the racial-epidermal schema, thus features prominently in the work of Fanon, who perceives it as integral to the operationalisation of racialising processes. In the chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," Fanon states:

> I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features… I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a haemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body (1967, p. 92).

And later:

> My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly; look, a Negro; the Negro is trembling… (1967, p. 93).

Fanon's visceral descriptions of his perception of his body illustrates his belief that bodies, and particularly skin, play a central role in creating and cementing race in encounters between black and white people. According to Fanon, the racial-epidermal schema is imposed upon black people and internalised (or in Fanon's language, epidermalised), rather than being collaboratively produced. Importantly, while visibly apparent physical attributes are a central aspect of Fanon's theory, culture is also significant to the racialising of bodies. In the seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon illustrates how racialisation is enacted and transmitted through culture and language. Language is of central importance to Fanon's work, a fact that he acknowledges from the very first sentence of the first chapter. He goes on to state, "To speak means to be in a

position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (1967, p. 8). For Fanon, culture and language serve not just as keys to a particular racial world, but racially alter the ontology of the person who employs them – they can make a person 'blacker' or 'whiter,' indicating that his theory of racialisation is not just about phenotypical attributes. Fanon suggests:

> Every colonized people - in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality - finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (1952, p. 18).

The notion that colonisation and its racialising structures allows for a person to "become whiter" through language and culture despite their physical appearance suggests that it is also possible for one to become "less white" through language and culture as well. This idea poses an interesting question for this thesis, which considers the problematic of whether white converts to a religion such as Islam can become *less* white through their adoption of certain cultural attributes, despite their "white" features. Can people become racialised as non-white through their conversion to a religion whose vast majority of adherents are considered to be non-white?

In order to unpack this question, it is necessary to first delve ever deeper into the literature on racialisation. Two of the leading and most influential scholars of racialisation, Howard Omi and Michael Winant (1994), posit that race continues to be analytically and politically significant. In their sociological study of race in the United States of America, they argue that while race has no biological basis and is continuously altered by historical and social forces, the category of race is "central to everyone's identity and understanding of the

world" (1994, p. 55), and thus remains a category that needs to exist in order to be interrogated. In contrast to Banton, Miles and Brown, Omi and Winant do not promote the disuse of the term race, but instead contend that race needs to be destabilised (1994, p. 68). Their book *Racial Formation in the United States,* first published in 1986, was ground-breaking for its time because it challenged traditional ideas of race that either saw it as an essentialised and static form of identity or as a purely illusory system of categorisation.

Drawing on Antonio's Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory asserts that racialisation is an ideological and historically informed process that is integral to the construction of a racial order. These racial hierarchies are continually contested by competing 'racial projects' that themselves change and adapt depending on the dominant socio-political discourses of the time. Racial projects can be created at the institutional level of government, big business, and mass media, but also by the ways in which people interact with each other and view their own identity, and take part in political action based on race (1994, p. 59). Omi and Winant convincingly argue that its anchoring in political structures and debates means that racialisation is an inherently political process "by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994, p. 55). This is so even though the reproduction and performance of racialisation on an everyday level may be apolitical, ordinary and indeed banal.

Omi and Winant's racial formation theory has been popular with scholars who take a broader view of race and racialisation than that provided by Banton and Miles, influenced by the "cultural turn in the social sciences and the influence of postmodernism and post-structuralism" (Murji & Solomos 2005, p. 19). Their description of racialisation as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group" (1986, p. 64) is

supported by Murji and Solomos (2005) who suggest that racialisation often occurs around issues that are at the heart of social and national anxieties (2005, p. 3). Contemporary discourse on race has shifted away from a preoccupation with biological differences to an understanding of race which does away with biological descriptors altogether, and focuses instead on cultural or religious differences between groups (Barker 1981, Gordon & Klug 1986, Tucker 1987, Solomos 1989). British academics Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) integrate this expanded concept of race and racialisation into their research. They argue that a narrow view of racialisation that refuses to entertain culturalist forms of racism overlooks the experiences of groups that are portrayed as inferior but not in ways that employ the same racial nomenclature as classical racism does. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) refer to how migrants and refugees are constructed within dominant discourses as inferior on ethnic grounds, to ultimately contend that racism does not even need to rely on racialisation but can use the notion of 'undesirability' to "assimilate, exterminate, or exclude'" (1992, p. 11). Anthias and Yuval-Davis thus contend that racialisation does not need to occur in order for racism to exist, as racism is "a discourse and practice of inferiorizing ethnic groups" (1992, p. 11) that relies on the "negative attribution given to culture, ethnic identity, personality as well as 'racial' stock" (1992, p. 11).

Emerging literature about the racialisation of religious communities draw on similar definitions of racialisation that preclude the need for a 'race.' In a post 9/11 political climate, sociologists and race theorists have become particularly interested in the racialisation of Islam in Western societies, with a substantial body of work emerging over the past decade (Al-Saji 2011; Amiraux 2012; Bayoumi 2008, 2009, 2015; Dunn et al 2007; Gotanda 2011; Elver 2012; Meer 2013; Meer & Modood 2009, 2012; Moosavi 2015a, Peucker and Akbarzadeh

2014; Selod & Embrick 2013). While all of these texts will not be reviewed in this chapter, it is sufficient to note that they demonstrate how the concept of racialisation has been increasingly used to explain Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism as a form of cultural racism, a topic that I explore in more depth in the following section.

In one of the earliest texts to write explicitly about the racialisation of Islam, "The Racialisation of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam in the United States," Khyati Joshi elaborates on the multi-tiered process of racialisation that takes place, in which race, religion, and ethnicity combine in a complex way to racially mark young South Asian people in the United States. She states that the ways in which Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam are represented in popular American discourse blurs the boundaries between race and religion and the racialisation of religion, wherein particular sets of phenotypical attributes come to be associated with a particular religion (2006, p. 216). Importantly for this thesis, Joshi argues that Christianity is also a racialised religion – it is racialised as white, and minority religions are pitted against its normative whiteness (2006, p. 212). Joshi makes a compelling argument about the dire consequences of such racialisation for Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, despite the different ways in which they experience it: "…they face a common outcome, whether by exoticization, vilification, or 'terrorization'… They suffer the same final fate: They are rendered theologically, morally, and socially illegitimate… These phenomena function cyclically to maintain a white, Christian hegemony in the United States" (2006, p. 223).

Joshi's (2006) concluding warning underlines the need for more extensive and more rigorous research on the impacts of racialisation at an individual, cultural and institutional level in white-dominant and Christian-centric countries. She argues that the racialisation of religious others is used as a dehumanising tool

by politicians and other leaders, the discursive ramifications of which can include the theological conflation of Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam, and the representation of each religion as monolithic, dismissing the possibility for differences and diversity within each religion. Joshi also raises concerns about the question of 'mistaken identity' (2006, p. 220) wherein people who are mistaken for Muslim, most commonly Sikhs wearing turbans, become the victims of anti-Muslim violence. A recent example of this can be found in the shooting of six Sikh people at a temple near Milwaukee in August 2012, which many believed to be motivated by Islamophobia (NY Times 2012). The increase of such attacks against Sikhs since September 11 2001 has led diasporic Sikh communities to actively resist racialisation by differentiating themselves from Muslims through strategies such as t-shirts and badges proclaiming 'Don't freak, I'm a Sikh!,' that problematically imply that the fear of Muslims is a legitimate one (Sian 2010).

Similar arguments have been made by sociologist Tariq Modood (2002), whose work on race, ethnic minorities, and secularism in Britain has often centred on South Asian and Muslim communities. Modood et al (2002) contends that there is a "palpable racialisation of Muslims going on in Britain and elsewhere" (2002, p. 422) despite the fact that those engaging in anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence rarely use the rationalisation of biological or genetic inferiority. The discourse of inferiority that is employed is instead anchored in religion, culture and community, not in colour. Despite this, physical appearance is still a significant part of the racialisation process as physical attributes such as skin colour, clothing, headgear, and facial hair can and are connected to particular religions at any given socio-historical juncture, which may also correspond with a racialised ethnic group (2002, p. 118). In the case of Britain, many Muslims are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, or Indian backgrounds, and most – though not all -

South Asians in Britain are Muslim, which can lead to a conflation of ethnicity and religion to the point where Muslims specifically are particularly racialised (Modood at al 2002, p. 422). Modood's argument is supported by the findings of Dunn et al in Australia (2007), except that in Australia the term 'Muslims' is more likely to be used interchangeably with 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern'. In addition, observable features of dress such as *ḥijāb*, *thawbs,* and *kufis*, as well as beards for men, become the symbols of Islam and differentiate Muslims who choose to don them (2007, p. 583). Importantly, Dunn et al additionally contend that the theory of racialisation can be applied to religious groups like Muslims because the aims and outcomes of racialisation are similar, regardless of whether a group is racialized with reference to phenotypical features or to the clothes they wear.

More recently, also writing from the United Kingdom, Leon Moosavi has spoken of the racialisation of white converts to Islam in work which closely mirrors the research aims and findings of this doctoral thesis, and my previously published work based on research conducted in 2010 as part of my Honours thesis (Alam 2012). Moosavi's interviews with 37 Muslim converts in the United Kingdom, 27 of them white, illustrated that white converts are 're-racialised' to "a status of 'non-white' or 'not-quite-white' which leads to them being recipients of Islamophobia" (2015a, p. 52). The Islamophobia that participants described in Moosavi's study usually marked them out as being non-white and racialised 'Others', although interestingly, in contrast to my own research, Moosavi's interview participants described the slurs that they were subjected to as being "teasing rather than threatening" (2015a, p. 46). Moosavi argues that this racialisation occurs because of the characterisation of Islam as a 'non-white' religion, which is closely linked to the fact that the majority of Muslims living in Britain are South Asian, namely Pakistani, Bangladeshi and

Indian. Islam becomes imagined as an extension of South Asian culture, in the same way that I found Islam is imagined as part of Arab culture in Australia - a process which sees Islam as being a non-white religion, thus rendering adherents of the religion non-white as well, or at least, not *as* white as before. He attributes the Islamophobia that participants experienced to their loss of white privilege, a concept that he articulates in more depth in an earlier article based on the same research (Moosavi 2014).

The work of Saher Selod and David Embrick in this area is particularly illuminating, as they provide a compelling account of *how* Muslims can come to be racialised (2013). They do this by "situating the Muslim experience in race scholarship," as stated in the title of their article, employing racialisation as an analytical tool rather than simply as a description of a phenomenon that is accepted as fact. Selod and Embrick demonstrate that long prior to the emergence of racial classification, non-Christian religious groups were demarcated and placed into hierarchies based on whether they were considered "godless" and thus capable of being enslaved and treated cruelly, and those who were of the "wrong religion," in other words, Judaism and Islam. Jews and Muslims were treated better than those who belonged to a pagan religion, but were classed as innately inferior to Christians because their blood was considered impure. In other words, Selod and Embrick argue, religious differences and religious inferiority were seen to be biologically driven, a logic that in conjunction with racial classification schemes served as the ideological foundation for colonialism in much of Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

For Selod and Embrick, this historical phenomenon is sufficient to situate Muslims and Jews firmly into race theory, because the process of categorising people into religious hierarchies based on the purity of their blood operates on the same logic as the hierarchisation of races. They use it as a basis to explore

the contemporary racialisation of Muslims and Arabs in the United States of America, suggesting that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Arabs in the United States became a visible minority, although they were still racially classified as white. Selod and Embrick suggest that racialisation occurs unevenly across Arab American populations, with Arab Muslims less like to identify as white than Arab Christians at 50% versus 73% (2013, p. 649). This phenomenon is supported by English professor Moustafa Bayoumi's argument that historically in the United States, "religion determines race," as evidenced by the rulings of judges hearing naturalisation cases in the 1940s (Bayoumi 2015, p. 48). Like Modood, Meer and other scholars before them, Selod and Embrick attribute this difference to the cultural motifs and markers that are associated with Muslims and which they claim contribute to a form of cultural racism against Muslim. They state:

> Current Muslim experiences with racism illustrate a return to essentializing religious differences to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving in America as well as in a global society. When cultural traits are racialised, this enables an understanding of how Muslim experiences with discrimination are racial in nature (Rana 2011). Muslim signifiers and symbols have become riddled with essentialized racial meanings such as foreign, violent, aggressive, and misogyny. Taken together, these stereotypes result in the belief that a Muslim body is incapable of upholding democratic or Western ideals and values (p. 650-651).

Importantly, Selod and Embrick state that the perceived religious and cultural differences that the racialisation of Muslims relies on need to be analysed in tandem with other perceived differences such as skin tone and physical features when drawing conclusions about the racialisation of Muslim communities and the subsequent racism against Muslim communities.

A review of the literature suggests that the question of whether or not religious communities can become racialised remains contentious, due in large part to the lack of consensus about what racialisation looks like in today's era.

However, the growing body of literature that studies and analyses the racialisation of Muslim communities is a compelling one, with several scholars of race and racialisation contending that the racialisation of Muslims relies on cultural markers as well as phenotypical markers that are associated with already racialised Muslim groups. These scholars posit that the combination of these factors leads to a form of cultural racism against Muslims. In the following section, I briefly outline some of the key works in writings about Islamophobia and also about cultural racism, to explore whether Islamophobia can be conceptualised as a form of cultural racism.

2.3 Islamophobia as Cultural Racism

In 1997, the Runnymede Trust in the United Kingdom published a report titled "Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All." This report contained 60 recommendations targeted at government departments, the media and the not-for-profit sector, amongst others. Although the term Islamophobia had emerged at least 15 years earlier (Tamdgidi 2012), and most probably as early as the late nineteenth century (Bravo Lopez 2011; Meer et al 2010), it is widely accepted that the Runnymede Report was the first time it was formally and officially defined as "the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims" (1997, p. 1). Since the report's publication, Islamophobia has become a commonly used term to describe anti-Muslim prejudice and racism, although notably it did not gain significant discursive popularity outside of the United Kingdom until the mid-2000s (Allen 2010).

Erik Bleich contends that while Islamophobia is an "emerging comparative concept in the social sciences" (2011, p. 1582), there is a noticeable lack of consensus on the definition of Islamophobia, making it difficult to assess and

compare Islamophobia across "time, location and social group" (2011, p. 1582). In his comprehensive examination of the range of definitions adopted by social scientists, Bleich suggests that the lack of precision is due to the fact that Islamophobia developed as a political, rather than analytical, concept (2011, p. 1593). He summarises the approaches taken by a number of key writers in the field to illustrate the range of understandings of Islamophobia, ultimately arguing that even where the definitions adopted are cogent and coherent in their own right, the differences between them make it difficult to use Islamophobia as a comparative tool. Bleich makes a strong case for the need to move towards a more widely accepted, common understanding of Islamophobia that is geared towards analytical rather than political ends. Sayyid (2010) makes a similar assessment of the field as it currently stands, stating that:

> Those who see Islamophobia not as a polemical but as an analytical term are confronted with the paucity of its current formulation. Neither consistently defined, deployed or understood, Islamophobia comes off as a nebulous and perpetually contested category. This has allowed it to circulate widely, but ineffectively: useful, for some, to vent grievances; used, by others, to pontificate; conveniently toothless platitudes and sound bites for canvassing politicians (p. 1).

Sayyid (2010) points out that as well as its supporters, the concept of Islamophobia has just as many detractors. Bravo López notes that some authors have argued that Islamophobia is an invention designed to mute genuine, well-founded criticisms of the religion (Bravo López 2011). These authors dispute the widespread existence of a specific prejudice that produces measurable acts of discrimination, vilification and violence against Muslims. Such sentiments belie the fact that a significant portion of the literature in support of the term, including the Runnymede report, makes a distinction between "legitimate criticism and disagreement" (The Runnymede Trust 1997) of the doctrine of

Islam with prejudice and hostility towards Muslims and "the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs" (1997, p. 4).

The debate has led some to argue that the term Islamophobia is misleading. Modood has convincingly argued that the phenomenon referred to is "more a form of racism than a form of religious intolerance, though it may perhaps be best described as a form of cultural racism, in recognition of the fact that the target group, the Muslims, are identified in terms of their non-European descent, in terms of their not being white, and in terms of their perceived culture" (1997, p. 4). I agree with Modood that Islamophobia is more often enacted as a form of cultural racism than as religious intolerance. However, I argue that Islamophobia is not always simply an attack on Muslims, but can also be an attack on a racialised understanding of Islam as a faith, that is separate from a critique of the doctrines of Islam on a theological or political level. This 'attack' does not simply refer to direct interpersonal racism that may occur as a result of a racialised construction of Islam, but also the structural implications of the discursive construction of Muslims as incompatible with Western values. This thesis thus takes the view that racialisation and religion are both important elements of Islamophobia due to this process of racialisation, a position taken by a number of authors including van Nieuwkerk (2004), Werbner (2005), Dunn et al (2007), Meer (2008) and Meer and Modood (2012).

The critiques of Islamophobia as a theoretical concept in academia are replicated within the general public. Writing from the United Kingdom, Meer and Modood (2012) examine why British people may be unsympathetic to the idea that Muslim minorities suffer racism, and list four main reasons:

1. Islam is a voluntarily chosen faith, and Muslims should thus not enjoy the same protections afforded to racial and ethnic minorities;

2. Because religion is looked down upon/mocked by intellectuals, the denigration of Islam becomes acceptable as its simply contributing to "healthy intellectual debate;"

3. An uneasiness with the display or practice of religion in the public sphere in a secular society;

4. An inability to feel compassion or empathy for a minority group that is associated with terrorism in public discourse, which leads to Muslims being viewed as a "threat rather than as a disadvantaged minority subject to increasingly pernicious discourses of racialisation" (Meer and Modood 2012, p. 50).

The argument that the negative stereotyping and fear of Islam and Muslims should not be conceptualised as a form of racism because being Muslim is a choice fails to acknowledge that both racial and religious forms of identity are socially constructed, multi-layered and contain elements of both choice and ascription. Meer (2008) argues precisely this when he advocates viewing "Muslim identity as a quasi-ethnic sociological formation" (p. 66). Furthermore, even if Muslim identity was simply a matter of personal choice, this does not mean Muslims should therefore be open to vilification, discrimination and incitement to hatred unless they are willing to change. Meer (2008, p. 77) points out; "If we argue that people's 'difference' is less deserving of protection if it is in anyway 'changeable', then we are advocating that those subject to discrimination or hostility should choose, where possible, to change their identity in order to avoid discrimination."

When reading the work of scholars like Meer and Modood, it must be recognised that studies on Islamophobia conducted in Europe reveal different

forms of Islamophobia to those undertaken in Australia (see Morgan and Poynting 2012 for case studies from Europe, North America and Australia). Alice Aslan's (2009) monograph *Islamophobia in Australia* (2009) argues that in Australia, Islamophobia manifests itself largely as a form of cultural racism that is "intertwined with a widespread anxiety and resentment felt towards migration and multiculturalism amongst the dominant white Anglo-Celtic Australians" (p. 21). This phenomenon was highlighted by the moral panic surrounding the now infamous gang rapes in Sydney's south-west in 2001, wherein Islamophobia and a fear of Muslim *masculinity* specifically were evident in the rhetoric surrounding the cases, in mainstream and new media as well as from political commentators (Dagistanli & Grewal 2012). In their chapter "Perverse Muslim Masculinities in Contemporary Orientalist Discourse: The Vagaries of Muslim Immigration in the West" (2012), Australian criminologist Selda Dagistanli and legal theorist Kiran Grewal examine the ways in which the moral panic which erupted around the gang rapes created folk devils of all "Middle Eastern men" regardless of whether they were Muslim or not (2012, p. 126). They posit that at the same time that the gang rapists were being 'othered,' racialised, and demonised by the media and public opinion, the victims of the crimes were simultaneously 'whitened' (2012, p. 126). This whitening was demonstrated in the way that news outlets emphasised that some victims had been called "Aussie pigs" and asked if they were Australian before being attacked, while ignoring the fact that the victims were from multiple ethnic backgrounds (Dagistanli & Grewal 2012).

The discursive strategy in the media juxtaposed the sinister, sexualised and violent Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern man against their white victims who were constructed as being representations of white Australia itself; attacks against them were viewed as attacks against the nation, and Muslim and Arab people

were consequently racialised and vilified for their cultural deviancy (Dagistanli & Grewal 2012, p. 127). This was further exacerbated by the fact that the gang rapes took place in the same two year period of the September 11 attacks and the TAMPA "children overboard" incident in 2001, and the flurry of media around Muslims and refugees resulted in a conflation between Muslim, Arab, and refugees with terrorists, criminals, gang rapists, and child abusers (Dagistanli & Grewal 2012, p. 127). Here, Islamophobia is intertwined with a fear of "ethnic patriarchy," which was a phenomenon that appeared again around the Cronulla riots of 2006. Writing about the Cronulla riots, Christina Ho (2007) has argued that this form of anti-Muslim racism is derived from a paternalistic nationalism that hides under the cloak of defending women's rights.

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

In addition to research on the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media and negative attitudes towards Muslims documented in quantitative surveys, there has been a growing body of work on Muslim experiences of direct and interpersonal racism after September 11 2001. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted a nationwide investigation in 2003 into the experiences of Muslims and Arabs in Australia after September 11, which found that out of the 1423 participants who were consulted during the project, the majority of them had experienced prejudice as a result of their ethnicity or their religion (HREOC 2004). The report, *Isma*, found that prejudice documented ranged from verbal insults to physical attacks, from strangers in public spaces to colleagues and neighbours, and in the provision of government services. Those who visibly identified as Muslim or Arab through their clothes or physical appearance were most at risk of abuse. This was made particularly evident in the Islamic Women's Welfare Council's 2008 report "Race, Faith and Gender," which examined the ways in which different types of discrimination – in this case, religious, racial and gender-based – converged upon Muslim women from non-white backgrounds. Focus groups held with 96 Victorian Muslim women between 2006 and 2007 revealed 137 experiences of racism, with 80% of them stating that they felt unwelcome and unsafe in Australia (IWWCV 2008).

More recently, Atie and Dunn (2013) found that 61.2% of Sydney Muslims they surveyed between 2011 and 2012 had experienced discrimination in the workplace, compared with 17.5% nationwide (not exclusively Muslim, between 2001 and 2008). Almost two thirds of Sydney Muslims had experienced racism through names or other insults. However, while many of the survey respondents had experienced racism, it was not necessarily an occurrence that they perceived to happen daily or even weekly, with only 16% stating that they

experienced racism frequently. Nonetheless, Atie's and Dunn's (2013) data indicates that direct racism is undeniably still a part of the contemporary Muslim experience in Australia, and one that necessitates exploration within this thesis.

It is clear from the variety of studies on Islamophobia conducted in minority Muslim contexts worldwide, some of which have been outlined above, is that Islamophobia is often conceptualised as a form of cultural racism that stems from the racialisation of Muslims. Such studies demonstrate how 'cultural' racism can be invoked against religious communities who are portrayed as being incompatible with and even hostile to the West, such as Muslims, to fulfil political agendas. Cultural racism relies on a belief that outsiders are 'undesirable', and was first used by Martin Barker to describe the political discourse used in Britain during Thatcher's era, which actively avoided the use of physical or biological referents and instead relied on aggressive nation-building through a strict stance against immigration (Barker 1981). The threat of the other to national cohesion is evoked through the language of 'cultural difference' rather than racial inferiority, something which is applied on an international level in the work of Samuel Huntington (1993), who argues that the primary source of conflict and threat to global security in a post-Cold War era lay not in politics or ideology but in a clash of cultures between Islamic and Western civilisations.

Writing in the 1980s, Phil Gordon and Francesca Klug (1986) provide a concise summary of Barker's work and the meaning of 'new racism':

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

making any value judgements about the 'others', but simply recognising that they are different. (1986, p. 22).

In the above excerpt, Gordon and Klug refer to cultural racism as "new" as opposed to the "old" or "biological" racism that they claim preceded it. It is debatable, however, whether so called cultural racism is new at all, or whether it has in fact always been a feature of racism, from its very inception. In her article "Post-race, Post-politics: The Paradoxical Rise of Culture after Multiculturalism,' Alana Lentin persuasively argues that it is the latter, and that attempts to attribute certain forms of racism to 'culture' rather than to 'colour' belie the historical complicity of both in constructions of racism and processes of racialisation (2014). She uses the example of anti-Semitism to support her position, stating that:

> While European anti-Semitism constituted the Jews as a race apart, the tropes of their difference were cultural as often as they were 'biological', just as in the case of Muslims today. Because it has become taboo to refer to race in biological terms, culture has become the means through which difference is now most commonly marked. Whereas this is often merely descriptive, the reference to cultural difference also implies a hierarchy in societies that are stratified along ethno-national and often colour-coded lines (2014, p. 7).

Lentin asserts that treating 'culture' and 'race' as separable and unrelated is not only an inaccurate representation of how both function in the social world, historically and contemporaneously, but has also enabled the rise of anti-multiculturalism in Europe. To explain her argument, Lentin traces the lineage of anti-racist discourse in Europe to the 'UNESCO tradition' which sought to abolish racism by mandating the removal of any references to race and replacing it with culture. In doing so, UNESCO made a strong statement against the idea of there being any biological or genetic rationale for differences between ethnocultural groups, claiming instead that "Differences in the achievements of different peoples should be attributed solely to their cultural history. The peoples of the world today appear to possess equal biological

potentialities for attaining any level of civilization" (the authors of the UNESCO statement 1950, cited in Lentin 2004, p. 270). By removing any reference to race and talking solely about culture, UNESCO failed to acknowledge that race and culture have been inextricably entwined in modern racism, and that understandings of culture are also racially inflected. Lentin posits that as a result, rather than eradicating racism, the UNESCO tradition simply redistributed the social anxieties that gripped Europe onto cultural differences instead of so-called racial ones. Since blaming social problems culture was not considered racist because there was no reference point to biology, by the terms of UNESCO's own statements, it allowed for anti-multiculturalist and assimilationist ideologies to thrive, which it continues to do in Europe today (Lentin 2004, 2011, 2014).

My review of the scholarship on Islamophobia has illustrated that while there is some contention about the meaning of the term and its analytical salience, a large body of theoretical and empirical studies suggest that Islamophobia operates as a form of anti-Muslim racism. While scholars such as Modood contend that Islamophobia is a 'new' form of racism that relies on culture rather than colour, I am persuaded by Lentin's argument that there is no discernible distinction between so-called 'old' and 'new' forms of racism, and that culture and colour have both been implicated in racism from its very inception. I suggest that Islamophobia can be understood as the racialisation of Islam and Muslims, and the corresponding attribution of negative characteristics to them. Arguably, examining the experiences of white converts to Islam can help us to test whether this conceptualisation of Islamophobia is a useful one, by exploring the experiences of white converts to Islam who move from the subject identity of unraced, to raced, through the process of conversion.

2.4 Whiteness, Christianity, and Australian Nationhood

Implicit in the racialising discourses that construct Muslims in Australia as culturally inferior is the idea that Islam is diametrically opposed to the ideals and values of whiteness. This is despite a reluctance to talk about race where it pertains to whiteness, with a preference to framing discussion in terms of ethnicity (Anglo-Celtic) or nationality (Australian) instead. The literature on whiteness is vast, and this thesis does not intend to try and address it in its entirety. Instead, this section will outline a number of key texts in whiteness studies that can help us to consider the relationship between discursive elements of whiteness and Christianity that arguably underpin Australia's national identity, in seeming contradiction to the multicultural and multi-faith composition of Australian society.

Whiteness scholars have argued that whiteness is rarely discussed in nations such as Australia because in white dominant countries it is not racialised; it is a 'non-race,' invisible but omnipresent (Bonnett 2005; Dyer 1997; Garner 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2004). Several scholars have argued that whiteness is thus naturalised, and constructed as normative (Frankenberg 1993; Hartigan 1997; McIntosh 1998). One of the earliest sustained scholarly examinations of whiteness can be found in cultural theorist Richard Dyer's essay *White,* later expanded into a book, in which he argues that whiteness is constructed and lived by white people as a racially or culturally neutral identity (Dyer 1997, p. 70). According to Dyer, the cultural practices and values associated with whiteness are viewed as normative and 'common sense,' while "race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people" (Dyer 2000, p. 539). He analyses the representation of white people in film, television and photography in recent history, and concludes that while

other racialised groups are represented in a way that draws attention to their racial difference, white people are simply represented as 'human' and unraced. Dyer calls on people to deconstruct white hegemony by "mak[ing] whiteness strange" (Dyer 1997, p. 10); to do so, he advised, we must treat it as a racial identity rather than a racially neutral experience, and racially mark whiteness in the same way that whiteness racially marks anything that is unlike it.

Dyer's assertions are compelling, although it should be noted that he is speaking to white people; it is only those who occupy whiteness as a site of power that are unable to perceive whiteness. As scholars such as bell hooks and W.E.B. Dubois have made abundantly apparent, for Black people, an already racialised group, whiteness has never been invisible or culturally neutral, but is indeed omnipresent; a factor that governs their lives through racially inflected institutions, social structures, and political systems. For such groups, whiteness is also perceptible on the bodies of white people, as bell hooks points out in her 1992 chapter, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." Speaking of her experiences teaching in the US university, she states:

> Usually, white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where 'whiteness' is a privilege signifier… Many of them were shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful (1992, p. 339-340).

In this chapter, bell hooks situates whiteness as the subject of the Black gaze, following the example of W.E.B. Du Bois who wrote evocatively of this same phenomenon in his 1920 essay, "The Souls of White Folk." However, Du Bois does not only talk of being able to *perceive* whiteness, but also emphasises that he can *see through* whiteness precisely because his ontological and epistemic

blackness has been moulded by whiteness, as all racialised groups have. Of "white souls," W.E.B. Du Bois states:

> Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder… I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism (2007, p. 44).

For Du Bois, whiteness is not simply one racial identity among many, but a social location conferring structural privilege upon those who inhabit it. It is for this reason that scholars such as Dyer and hooks have proposed that the white gaze be flipped back onto whiteness, in the hopes that by exposing whiteness, the racial structures that sustain it will also be exposed and eventually dismantled. This is exemplified by hooks in her earlier book "Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics" where she stated that she wanted "all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what's going on with whiteness" (1992, p. 54). She suggests the need for "the production for a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness," claiming that "In far too much contemporary discourse – though there are some outstanding exceptions – race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white" (1992, p. 54).

Central to any discussion of whiteness, then, is the understanding that whiteness carries significant privilege and authority within a racialised hierarchical schema that centres white experiences and white bodies. The privilege that whiteness affords white people is sustained through structures and schemas that normalise whiteness and construct it as both natural and common sense. Through this process whiteness becomes, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "a screen for projecting the political phantoms of the past on the

unfulfilled surfaces of the present; but at the same time it resembles what house painters call a primer, a base color that regulates all others, a norm that spectacularly or stealthily underlies powerful social values" (Bhabha 1998, p. 23). Through this quotation, Bhabha situates whiteness as not just a racial identity, but as a "strategy of authority" (Bhabha 1998, p. 22), in the vein of W.E.B. Du Bois (2007).

In contrast, British-born sociologist Ruth Frankenberg posits that in order to destabilise and decentre whiteness, it should be reinscribed as one racial identity amongst many (1993, p. 1). In her now classic book *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), Frankenberg recounts and analyses the life histories of 30 white women as they discuss their thoughts on whiteness, race, and racism in the United States. Frankenberg provides a deep empirical exploration of how race shapes white people's lives, and increasingly, the study of whiteness adopts Frankenberg's theory that whiteness derives much of its power from the very fact that it usually *isn't* treated as a racial identity. This is highlighted through Frankenberg's model of three discursive repertoires that she believes encapsulates the forms that the narratives of her interview participants took (1993, p. 14): essentialist racism, colour and power evasion and race cognisance. These racial repertoires will be delineated further and deployed in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

Du Bois, hooks, Frankenberg and Bhabha have all theorised whiteness from the perspective of the United States, with Dyer writing from the United Kingdom. While they provide a helpful introduction to the concept of whiteness and a background to how whiteness studies emerged as a field of study, it is important to acknowledge that the function and motility of whiteness differs according to national context. The centrality of whiteness to the formation of the Australia nation state and the Australian national identity is indisputable. It is

apparent both in Australia's violent colonial past and present and in its policies on immigration, which have operated in tandem to attempt to affix 'Australianness' with a white racial identity through the exclusion of Indigenous Australians and non-white immigrants and refugees. The origin of 'White Australia' began with the myth of *terra nullius*, meaning "no one's land," whereby in 1788 white British colonists declared Australia to be uninhabited, denying the existence of the land's Indigenous inhabitants while simultaneously exterminating them (Grimshaw et al. 1994). The claim of *terra nullius* enabled colonists to 'claim' Australia without having to formally 'conquer' it. Goenpul woman and Professor of Indigenous Studies Aileen Moreton-Robinson states that the formation of Australia as a nation state was built on the dispossession of land from Indigenous people, just as Canada, Hawaii, New Zealand and the United States were too (2015). The process of dispossession has continued since white invasion until today, by denying Indigenous sovereignty and making "piecemeal concessions" (2015, p. xi). By dispossessing Indigenous people of their land, she argues, the Australian nation is constructed as a white possession (Moreton-Robinson 2005, 2015). Moreton-Robinson asserts that in Australia, "white possession operates socio-discursively to produce the racial contract that enables, constrains and disciplines subjects in various ways. The possessiveness of white subjectivity is thus regulated through its relationship with the nation state" (2015, p. 54).

The mode of rationality that is produced through this process, which she calls the "white possessive," is at the core of Moreton-Robinson's prolific writings on whiteness and the Australian national project. Moreton-Robinson also refers to the role of immigration policies in the establishment of Australia as a white possession, in tandem with Indigenous dispossession. She suggests that after Australia officially became a nation in 1901, Australia continued to be

constructed and enforced as a white man's land through the White Australia Policy which intentionally restricted the immigration of non-white persons up until 1973. Whiteness was again marked as the identifier around which the nation was to be built (Moreton-Robinson 2005). Moreton-Robinson suggests that the cultural inscription of whiteness in Australia has led to not only the conflation of race and ethnicity with the nation, but also with a broader understanding of 'the West' and the values it upholds, claiming that "whiteness secures hegemony through discourse by normalising itself as the cultural space of the West" (2004, p. 78). The cultural space that Moreton-Robinson alludes to may potentially exclude those who do not fit the white Australian archetype, including people of non-Christian faiths.

Another notable Australian scholar in whiteness studies is Ghassan Hage (1998), who describes the role that whiteness continues to play in the Australian nation through an evaluation of the "discourse of Anglo-decline." Hage posits that politicians like John Howard and Pauline Hanson in the mid- to late-1990s, were skilled in the perpetuation of this discourse, which enabled white Australians to lament the multicultural nature of Australia and dream of the days of Anglo-Celtic centrality. Hage also notes in later work that Howard was successful in articulating "white paranoia" (2002, p. 433), stating:

> For despite his firm belief in the transhistorical nature of Australian society based on these values, Howard also advances the thesis that society and its people are drifting or have drifted away from the core values and that there is a need to bring them back. There is no paranoid politics without some whingeing about some corruption to the core values of society (2002, p. 433).

Hage's (1998) and Moreton-Robinson's (2015) extensive research have significantly shaped the field of whiteness studies in Australia today. Noticeably absent from their scholarship, however, is a sustained inquiry into the ways in which religion - specifically Christianity - interacts with whiteness

and national identity, despite the White Australia Policy's legacy in creating a nation where Christianity is the dominant faith. This absence is representative of the broader whiteness literature; while there is the occasional tacit allusion to the exclusion of racialised non-Christian religious groups from the bounds of whiteness, there is little to be found in the way of explicit analyses on the relationship between Christianity and whiteness. Dyer (1997) touches on this interconnection in *White*, although he notes early on that he does not believe that Christianity is essentially white. Instead, he argues that the European construction of whiteness evolved from a Christian understanding of the battle between the body and the spirit, the former of which is seen as inferior and something to be conquered and transcended (Dyer 1997, p. 17). This, coupled with the dualism of the Cartesian worldview that underpins modern sciences (Grosfoguel 2011), was central to the logic of colonising missions. To be governed by the body was something of non-white races, who were studied and categorised by way of their physical features, while to perform the same analysis on white people would be to concede the body's control over them (Dyer 1997, p. 23). Although Dyer's argument that whiteness was developed via Christianity's body/spirit dualism is not particularly persuasively made, he does offer some examples of how Christianity was whitened by Europeans:

> Yet not only did Christianity become the religion, and religious export, of Europe, indelibly marking its culture and consciousness, it has also been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history, seen in relation to, for instance, the following: the persistence of the Manichean dualism of black:white that could be mapped onto skin colour difference; the role of the Crusades in racialising the idea of Christendom (making national/geographic others into enemies of Christ); the gentilising and whitening of the image of Christ and the Virgin in painting; the ready appeal to the God of Christianity in the prosecution of doctrines of racial superiority and imperialism (1997, p. 17).

Dyer's (1997) examples are illustrative of the ways in which Christianity was associated with whiteness early on in the formative stages of race classification

in Europe. Dyer's argument supports the work of Selod and Embrick, which I have outlined in section 2.2 of this chapter, who contend that non-Christian religions were considered inferior to Christians due to the impurity of their blood, a concept which is intrinsically mired in racial language.

A more common approach in the literature is to make discursive connections between Christianity and whiteness through its relationship to another cultural space - 'the West'. Sohail Daulatzai has argued that the concept of the West is both racially and religiously inflected, positing that the idea of 'the West' and the Europe has for several centuries been articulated through reference to a white racial identity and a Christian religious identity. He draws on the work of noted sociologists of religion such as Gil Anidjar and Talal Asad to argue that "the very idea of the West emerges from and through the figure of the Muslim" (2012, p. xvii). Daulatzai contends that this phenomenon continues today, positing that:

> Although 9/11 is what seems to have raised the spectre of Islam in relation to the West, a genealogy of the idea of race reveals that the Muslim – as the Other to a normative whiteness – has not only haunted the very foundation of the West since its inception but has also given the West (now Europe and the United States) meaning, defining who is civilized and who is savage, who is democratic and who is autocratic, who is peaceful and who is violent, who is human who is not (2012, p. xvii).

Similar arguments have been made by British cultural geographer Alastair Bonnett, who convincingly argues that the concept of "the West" has become a stand-in for whiteness as it "helped resolve some of the problematic and unsustainable characteristics of white supremacism" (Bonnett 2005, p. 17). In his article, 'From the Crises of Whiteness to Western Supremacism,' Bonnett maps the ways in which the term 'white' came to be dropped from common English parlance from the 1930s onwards, at the same time as the concept of 'the West' was starting to be introduced more frequently into British discourses

(2005). Bonnett links what he terms the 'crisis of whiteness' with the rise of Western supremacism, stating that, "White attitudes became things to be studied, and eventually 'whiteness' became a term to be problematised. But 'the West' and 'Western' emerged as categories to be believed in; understood not as constructs but as coherent and meaningful expressions" (2005, p. 23). Additionally, Bonnett posits in an earlier article that Christianity is an important element of how the West perceives itself (2003, p. 332), stating that "The West is defined as a set of principles or values inherent within (or associated with) a "European" or "Western Christian" heritage, culture and history" (2005, p. 334). If we agree with his suggestion that the concept of the West has come to be used as a stand-in for whiteness as references to race decline in public discourse, then Christianity is arguably the religious expression of whiteness.

Bonnett's articulation of the synonymity of 'whiteness' and 'Western' finds purchase in this thesis. As stated previously, while it is no longer considered acceptable to refer explicitly to 'race', this does not mean that race is no longer relevant. I suggest that in contemporary Australia, race is more commonly evoked through references to civilisation such as 'the West,' as Bonnett contends, but also through culture and nation. In Australia, race is often evoked through references to the Australian way of life and Australian values, and Australia's national identity is constructed around whiteness, Christianity and so-called Western values such as democracy and modernity. In her article "'Common Values': Whiteness, Christianity, Asylum Seekers and the Howard Government" (2006), Holly Randell-Moon makes the assertion that in Australia, the association between Christianity, whiteness, and Australian identity re-emerged after the election of John Howard as Prime Minister in 1997. Randell-Moon convincingly argues that the Howard Government's use of Christianity in

its political discourse 'is reflective of an investment in, and protection of, a white teleology of Australian nationalism.' The article posits that in contrast to the nation building tactics of the era of the White Australia Policy, the Howard Government did not seek to develop the national identity around a whiteness that was explicitly racially marked, but rather did so through references to 'common values' that are ultimately tied up in Christianity and implicitly, whiteness, while purporting secularity. Randell-Moon contends that this lead to the construction of an "Anglocentric national identity where whiteness may not always be located on the body but can be an imagined investment in a system of values that associates Australianness with whiteness through Christianity" (2006, p. 11). She points out that during his time as Prime Minister, John Howard maintained his insistence that while anyone could freely practice whatever religion they chose, Australia's Judeo-Christian heritage should always be acknowledged. Here, "Judeo-Christian" is used in to refer to the civilisation space of the West, of which whiteness and Christianity are central components.

Howard's contribution to the discursive association of whiteness, Australianness and Christianity throughout his administration has been well documented (Maddox 2005, 2007; Casey 2006; Randell-Moon 2006; Sunderland 2007). Marion Maddox's work on Christianity in the Australian public sphere and the rise of the religious right has been particularly instrumental in exposing the influence of Christian religious fundamentalism on Liberal Party policy under Howard's leadership. In her book, 'God Under Howard' (2005), Maddox argues that Howard and his cabinet somewhat successfully imported the rhetoric and tactics of the Christian religious right in the United States into Australian politics, albeit in a more covert way through the indirect manipulation of public policy including policy on euthanasia (p. 59), same-sex

marriage (p. 101), abortion and stem cell research (p. 224), and diverting resources from the poor to the rich (p. 218). Importantly, Maddox notes that Howard did not present himself as a particularly religious or fundamentalist Christian, as many Presidents in the US have been known to do, but instead was a very astute and calculated politician who made "vaguely religious allusions" (2005, p. 218) that implied he was guided by Christian values, when it was strategic to do so.

Howard's use of religious, specifically Christian, references is said to have encouraged an increase in the presence of religion in political discourse in Australia (Maddox 2005, 2009; Warhurst 2007). Anna Crabb's (2009) analysis of 2422 speeches given by prominent Australian MPs between 2000 and 2006 to measure the frequency of Christian references indicated that in the first half of the decade references to Christianity in speeches steadily rose, as did the amount of policy issues which drew on those references (2009, p. 275). Terms such as 'Christ', 'Jesus', 'God', 'Bible' and 'church' were present in an average of 21.3% of the speeches, with 2000 seeing approximately 9% of speeches carrying those terms, and 2005 seeing a peak of 24% (2009, p. 263). Crabb argues that following September 11, politicians increasingly alluded to a Christian basis for national identity in order to draw the majority-Christian nation together in an era of perceived security threats against the nation from non-Christian enemies (2009, p. 275). To support her assertion, she demonstrates that the three key policy areas in which Christian terms were used throughout speeches were in foreign relations, followed by fabric of society, and finally freedom and democracy (2009, p. 267).

More recently, Australian sociologist Farida Fozdar has looked beyond the Howard era to analyse how former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott utilised Christianity in their political rhetoric. In her article "The

Choirboy and the Mad Monk" (2011), Fozdar draws on speeches and essays by Rudd and Abbott to demonstrate that Australian politicians have been moving away from asserting Australia as a secular nation to unabashedly embracing and promoting the association between Australian identity and Christianity (2011, p. 632). She notes that the increased references to Christianity in political discourse are in addition to the already existing Christian framework of Australia's political and judicial system (Fozdar 2011). Fozdar (2011) points to the Christian prayers used to open parliaments and the default of swearing in politicians on the Bible as two overt examples. As well as successfully drawing attention to the lack of secular neutrality in Australian politics, Fozdar examines the consequences of privileging Christianity over minority religions such as Islam which is positioned as at best, suspicious, and at worst, antithetical and even a threat to the Australian nation due to its perceived moral distance from Christianity (2011, p. 630). Fozdar highlights the importance of race in this positioning as well, stating that "Australia can increasingly be seen as a 'Christian' nation, as part of the 'whiteness' that Hage (1998) identified as fundamental to Australia's concept of its nationhood" (2011, p. 630).

What we find in the contemporary Australian texts is the suggestion that the rise of Christian-centrism in Australia after the election of John Howard accelerated in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. This phenomenon has been met by some with unease. The Secular Party of Australia was formed in 2006 and registered as a Federal political party in 2010, in order to help curb what they saw as an encroachment of the Church into both the Labor and Liberal parties (Secular Party of Australia 2016). For others, however, it simply reinforced their belief that Christianity was and should remain a core tenet of Australian identity in the wake of increasing religious diversity. Nelson et al's article on the Freedom of Belief in Australia inquiry highlights that 40% of

submissions to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) drew attention to the nation's 'Judeo-Christian core,' and many of these "were despondent or resentful of its displacement from the centre of Australian cultural life" (Nelson et al 2012, p. 309). In contrast, only 6% of submissions stated that Australia should see itself as a secular nation (2012, p. 309).

Of course, submissions are not necessarily reflective of broader public opinion, as is pointed out by the authors when they state that "The submission process privileges those with a vested interest, and in this case they were very specific sub-sections of 'the public'" (2012, p. 314). Keeping this in mind, Nelson et al's content analysis highlights the tensions between divergent national visions of Australia's 'religious character.' The positions with the most backing in the submissions were taken by those arguing for a secular state, and to a much larger degree for those whom Christianity remains central to the Australian national identity (Nelson et al 2012). On the face of it these appear to be competing visions; however, this thesis takes the view put forth by Sophie Sunderland in her article *"Post-Secular Nation; or how "Australian spirituality privileges a secular, white, Judaeo-Christian culture"* (2007). Sunderland argued that while s 116 of the Australian Constitution's posits Australia as a secular nation through the separation of Church and State, the very concept of 'secularism' is an elastic one that is moulded by the cultural landscape of the nation (2007), and "the meanings and assumptions that shape secularism also vary" (Asad 2003 cited in Sunderland 2007, p. 58). According to Sunderland, the form that secularism takes in Australia is one that "includes the elevation of 'Judeo-Christian ethic' to the level of the national culture" (2007, p. 58). Importantly, like Randell-Moon (2008), Sunderland (2007) links Australian secularism to an "imagined, core, white, Anglo-Celtic subjectivity" (2007, p. 67) which she argues is "coterminous to national identity" (2007, p. 67). I examine the

association between secularism and Christianity further in sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3 of this thesis, with reference to the work of Talal Asad (2003, 2006) and Gil Anidjar (2006).

This review of the literature suggests that there is a limited amount of research on the association between whiteness and Australianness, and Christianity and Australianness, but the work is suggestive of the possibility of a connection between whiteness and Christianity with 'Australianness' playing an intermediary role. Although some academics do make reference to it (Hage 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2005; Fozdar 2009), there is a need for a more rigorous evaluation of the link and how it may affect the development of a multi-faith as well as multi-cultural nation.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a critical analysis of three different but closely interrelated bodies of scholarship and in doing so, provided an introduction to the conceptual framework utilised by this thesis. I reviewed key theoretical and empirical studies of racialisation to map the genealogy of racialisation studies, emphasising that the past decade has seen a rapidly-growing body of work on the racialisation of Islam and Muslims in Western nations. This trend in the literature departs from earlier studies of racialisation that did not explicitly address the question of religion, and in some cases, disputed whether religious groups could even become racialised.

Despite the substantial amount of empirical research that has already been conducted in the field of racialisation broadly, there is room to further contribute to and expand on understandings of racialisation as it relates to

Islam. For the purposes of this research project, I rely on the claims of relevant and recent literature that argues that Muslims are cast as a racialised group in Western nations like Australia, in order to analyse the experiences of white converts to Islam who, prior to their conversion, occupied an 'unraced' or 'invisible' racial positioning. I suggest that racialisation may be a useful concept to examine their experiences because Australia's national identity coheres around a Christian religious identity and a white racial identity, as I have argued through my review of the Australian and international whiteness studies literature. This raises the question of whether the concept of 'Australianness' is central to the racialisation of Muslims and Islam.

In the following chapter, I elaborate on the methodological approach of my research project, and carefully outline the research methods that were utilised in the course of my fieldwork.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of scholarly literature relevant to this thesis, in which I critically analysed pertinent scholarship on race, racialisation, and racism, Islamophobia, and the Muslim experience in Australia. Through my evaluation of the literature, I highlighted the contemporary debates and gaps within the scholarship and clearly established the contribution that this project makes to the relevant fields, providing further explanation and support for the research objectives outlined in Chapter One. In this chapter, I describe the methodology chosen to operationalise these same research objectives, and outline the methods and research design used in the collection of data to meet my research aims.

Central to the aims of my study was to uncover how white converts to Islam conceptualise their experiences of race prior to and after their conversion to Islam. My methodological decisions were thus strongly influenced by the epistemological paradigm offered by social constructionism, a theory which suggests that knowledge about the social world is ultimately constructed by individuals through an interactive relationship between the individual and the subject of knowledge (Rogoff 1992). Social constructionism assumes that people's perceptions of their actions, thoughts, and feelings are best understood in relation to their broader social and cultural context (Hussey and Hussey 1997), and thus privileges the lived experiences of individuals and how they make sense of those experiences.

In keeping with my commitment to exploring the lived experiences of white Muslim converts and the epistemology of social constructionism, I conducted twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people who identified as white and had converted to Islam prior to the interviews taking place. The qualitative method of in-depth interviews lent itself to the task of exploring how white converts to Islam construct their identities, sense of self and racial reality as described in their own words, by privileging the depth, detail and complexity of their experience over generalisability and identifiable truths (Phillimore and Goodson 2004, p. 157). By taking a semi-structured approach to the interviews and guiding the participants through specific themes I wanted to cover, I attempted to capture the subjective nuances within participants' personal narratives by allowing them some degree of flexibility in the telling of their stories, whilst attempting to maintain the integrity of my research aims. I then used thematic analysis to analyse the transcripts of the interviews and draw out key concepts and patterns in the participants' narratives. A thematic coding framework was developed during this process.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy of this study complements its theoretical positioning, which departs from the positivist conceptualisation of race as a fixed and immutable part of one's identity that can be observed, measured and often used as a biological determinant of human behaviour. As outlined in Chapter Two, this thesis adopts the approach of Omi and Winant (1994), who view race as a category that is socially constructed, contingent and fluid, influenced by prevailing social norms and discourses. Omi and Winant's framework does not deny that there are observable differences between people, for example with regards to physical attributes such as skin or hair colour, but posits that the way

these differences are categorised and the meanings that individuals give to physical features are informed by social factors. The study is thus most appropriately located within the post-positivist realm of critical realism, which posits that while an objective reality does exist, our knowledge of it is mediated by socially constructed interpretations that differ from individual to individual, and group to group. Critical realism can perhaps be best characterised as ontologically realist – in that it accepts the existence of a reality external to human thoughts and impulses – whilst adopting a constructivist epistemological position which argues that reality is unknowable outside of human interpretations and standpoints. The ontological positioning of critical realism avoids the challenges thrown up by radical constructivist or subjectivist approaches to knowledge that are inclined to deny the existence of any external reality, in either the natural or social world.

More significantly for this study, critical realism still allows room for constructivist epistemologies such as social constructionism, the paradigm that argues that individuals construct rather than uncover knowledge about the world, by sharing their experiences and perception of reality with others in a way that can commonly be understood. Social constructionism relies on the notion of intersubjectivity, in which groups of individuals develop shared understandings based on common experiences and assumptions about the world that then form the ground for their communication (Rogoff 1990). Any personal meanings shaped through these experiences are affected by the intersubjectivity of the community to which she or he belongs. French anthropologist and sociologist of science Bruno Latour (2003) argues that it is this process of knowledge-production that puts the 'social' into 'social constructionism' – the fact that it is a collaborative process, rather than because it is concerned with the social world.

In other words, unlike essentialist positivist epistemologies that view race as static and naturally defined, social constructionist paradigms conceive of race as a socio-cultural reality, albeit a flexible one that can shift and change as different groups undergo varying processes of racialisation guided by group-defined norms of the time. By adopting a critical realist approach, it is possible to acknowledge that race is a reality for people who are racialised and who experience life as raced individuals, while simultaneously affirming that the categories we use and the very way we talk about race has been developed through collaborative processes in various social groups. This foundation is particularly relevant to this study which explores how whiteness can be challenged, disrupted, 'crossed over' or temporarily erased, depending on the social circumstances that participants found themselves in.

It is also necessary to indicate here that the concept of *experience* is central to the epistemological thrust of this thesis, whereby experience is used as an analytical category and not just an ordinary word. The experiences referred to by participants are not treated solely as discrete, personalised and neutral occurrences in time, but reveal the workings of the racial hierarchies and racialisation processes that they are imbricated within. Feminist theorists writing in the late 20th century were amongst the first to suggest that utilising experience as a category of analysis could expose the power relations inherent in knowledge production, arguing that theorising women's experience contributed to the destabilisation of patriarchal structures and hierarchies in the process (Bordo 1990; Tanesini 1994). By adopting the view that women's material experience was necessarily shaped by the gendered ordering of society, feminist scholars challenged the idea that knowledge is neutral, objective and universal, and introduced the idea that marginalised groups speak of their experience on the margins from a place of epistemic privilege.

The importance of foregrounding lived experience in the development of theory has since been taken up by post-colonial theorists writing about the ontological positioning of black and colonised peoples, such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Stuart Hall (1990) and Gayatri Spivak (1988). In Chapter Two of this thesis, I outlined Fanon's description of how the lived, bodily and material experience of race (in his case blackness) is determined via the operation of two schemas that act as a dialectic between the body and the world, and as crucial components of racialisation. Experience – the encounter between the body and the outside world – corroborates the existence of these schemas and the process of racialisation they contribute to. Fanon contends that "the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other" (1967, p. 90) and that the experience of blackness can only be understood through interactions with the white imagination and the white gaze. Rather than dismissing experience as simply 'anecdotal,' a Fanonian approach elevates the role of experience in theory by proposing that understanding the experience of marginalised peoples is fundamental to understanding the workings of entrenched racialised power structures that have been established through colonialism. The work of Dutch sociologist Philomena Essed is instructive here in elaborating the centrality of experience to the study of racism, which is one of the manifestations of racialisation examined in this thesis. Similar to the approach of this thesis, Essed's book "Understanding Everyday Racism" focuses on micro-level interactions and formulates a theoretical understanding of everyday racism by analysing over 2000 experiences of black women. Essed suggests that experience is the "best basis for the analysis of the simultaneous impact of racism in different sites and in different social relations" (1991, p. 4) because of its multidimensional nature

and ability to position the person recounting the experience in a particular social context and social location, which is vital to understanding the structural settings that allowed the experience to occur. Importantly, Essed states that experience as she utilises the concept does not refer simply to personal experiences, but also describes "the impact of knowledge of general (structural) phenomena on one's definition of reality" (p. 58). This thesis takes a similar approach to Essed by relating the experience of white Muslim converts (personal, vicarious and cognitive) to the dominant social structures which shape their perspective of their reality.

3.3 Evaluating the Quality of Qualitative Research

Given that the epistemological basis of qualitative research is anti-positivist in nature, there has been considerable debate amongst social researchers about how to measure the quality of a qualitative study, and indeed whether it is even fruitful to do so (Guba and Lincoln 1986; Hope and Waterman 2003; Morse et al 2002; Sandelowski 1993; Silverman 2006). Hope and Waterman (2003) identify and outline three key positions within the literature on how to effectively gauge the quality of qualitative data:

1. Using the same criteria as is used by studies underpinned by positivism, namely validity and reliability;

2. Developing a new set of criteria for qualitative research that takes into account the distinct epistemological and methodological frameworks that it occurs in; and

3. Doing away with the idea of criteria altogether (p. 121).

Based on his research in the field of nursing, Gary Rolfe suggests that the reason that qualitative researchers continue to hold such divergent positions on how to assess the quality of data in qualitative research is due to the fact that "there is no unified body of theory, methodology or method that can collectively be described as qualitative research; indeed, that the *very idea* of qualitative research is open to question" (2006, p. 305). He goes on to explain why consensus on the definition of qualitative research is virtually impossible – while some make the distinction based on the type of data that is collected (i.e. numerical vs textual), others refer to the ontological or epistemological differences that underpin quantitative and qualitative data. This in turns creates more challenges and confusion as researchers debate how a distinction rooted at the ontological or epistemological level applies when it comes to studies that use mixed methods (Rolfe 2006).

Rolfe argues that a unified and coherent qualitative research paradigm is thus only found in research textbooks. Given the reality of a multiplicity of qualitative paradigms, the question of gauging the quality of any one qualitative study becomes ever more difficult to answer. Scholars such as Morse et al. (2002) argue that it is possible to achieve validity and reliability within a qualitative project, two of the traditional criteria for measuring the quality of research in the positivist tradition. They contend that the researcher can instil rigor into their research simply by employing a series of 'verification strategies' throughout every stage of the process, for "Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility" (Morse et al 2002, p. 2). The strategies they suggest include "ensuring methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis, thinking theoretically, and theory development" (Morse et al. 2002, p. 11). Morse et al posit that by implementing each of these strategies

consistently and iteratively – that is, moving between design and implementation – it is entirely possible to maintain rigor throughout as the researcher can modify the process as necessary to ensure congruence between the research question, literature, data collection and analysis. The outcome of this investigator responsiveness is that the results of the study will constitute valid scientific evidence.

The central premise of Morse et al's argument is that validity and reliability are necessary qualities of all research projects, whether quantitative or qualitative, and need not challenge the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research. Authors like Silverman (2006) have made similar arguments for the appropriateness of validity and reliability as criteria of quality regardless of the researcher's theoretical or methodological positioning. Silverman suggests a variety of methods to ensure validity and reliability, such as analytic induction, deviant case-analysis and using appropriate tabulations (2006 p. 236). This is contrary to the current dominant view amongst qualitative researchers at least in North America, which insists that qualitative research is substantially different from quantitative research insofar as qualitative research does not seek to find 'the truth,' and thus must employ different measures of quality and different terminology (Rolfe 2006). According to health researcher Margaret Sandelowski (1993), drawing on seminal work by Guba and Lincoln (1981), qualitative research should be evaluated with regards to its 'trustworthiness,' which is gauged by the reader of the article or report after the research is complete. The researcher is responsible for making their research practices transparent and in Sandelowski's words, "auditable" by "leaving a decision trail" (1993 p. 2). Morse et al (2002) strongly disagree with the concept of post-hoc evaluation by the consumers of the end results of the research, which is

why they stress that the responsibility must be on the researcher to establish their study's validity every step of the way.

Some scholars have appropriated the framework of 'trustworthiness' created by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for qualitative research instead of the traditional markers of validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba split trustworthiness into four criteria which are now used by many researchers in the social sciences and other disciplines: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In their model, credibility loosely corresponds with internal validity, transferability with external validity or generalisability, dependability with reliability and confirmability with objectivity. Shenton (2004) summarises the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) to highlight the key strategies they suggest for researchers to use to meet these criteria. For example, to ensure credibility Lincoln and Guba suggest using established research methods, developing an early relationship or familiarity with participating social groups/organisations, random sampling, triangulation, peer scrutiny, negative case analysis, reflective commentary by the researcher and member checks, also known as respondent validation, which Lincoln and Guba believe to be the most useful and significant way to bolster the credibility of a research study (1985).

Indeed, some of the strategies proposed by Morse et al (2002) and Silverman (2006) appear to mirror those in Lincoln and Guba (2002). There are some exceptions, however, such as Silverman's critique of triangulation and Morse et al's problematisation of member checks, for example. The greatest issue though appears to be in the post-hoc nature of some of the strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba, particularly those which go to the authenticity of the data collected, which authors like Morse et al and Silverman state are neither useful nor establish validity. Still, it is debatable whether or not some of the differences in terminology between those who continue to use reliability and

validity as measures of the quality of a research and those who prefer to use Lincoln and Guba's criteria is just that – a difference in the terms used, rather than a distinction in the concepts themselves.

Alternative criteria have also been proposed by other scholars engaged in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contend that research is valid if: "It is sufficiently grounded, triangulated, based on naturalistic indicators, carefully fitted to a theory, comprehensive in scope, credible in terms of member checks, logical and truthful in terms of its reflection of the phenomena in question" (p. 579). Additionally, they outline two key issues that they believe researchers need to address and that their peers should consider when assessing the quality of their work: how the manifestation of power and political viewpoints are articulated, and verisimilitude, or how persuasive the text is in its representation of the truth (whilst acknowledging that gauging truth is an interpretive process). Similarly, to this last point, Koch and Harrington (1998) maintain that the plausibility of the narrative offered by the researcher is key to determining the credibility of the findings, suggesting that this can be achieved by reflexive, articulate writing that situates the researcher within the research. Both of these approaches suggest "that there is an inherent articulate component to good qualitative research" (Hope and Waterman 2003).

Critics of the model proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1985) do not always fall on the side of those who prefer a positivist approach to evaluating research – there are also those researchers who contend that the purposes of qualitative research are still not accurately captured by their model. For example, Margaret Sandelowski (1993) claims that reliability or dependability is not necessary for qualitative inquiry because its premise relies on "the notion of reality as external, consensual, corroboratory, and repeatable" (p. 3), all things that are not assumed in interpretivist or naturalistic paradigms. She goes on to argue

that an emphasis on reliability actually threatens research validity because it forces conformity to the data at the expense of the meaningfulness of the data, and that validity is more important to maintaining the integrity of the data than its reliability. Sandelowski is also critical of the emphasis that positivists place on the necessity for 'rigour' to obtain validity in a research project. She states that a preoccupation on the technical aspects of the research places us in "danger of succumbing to the 'illusion of technique' (Sandelowski 1993 p. 1). This is problematic for qualitative research because "there is an inflexibility and an uncompromising harshness and rigidity implied in the term 'rigor' that threatens to take us too far from the artfulness, versatility, and sensitivity to meaning and context that marks qualitative works of distinction" (Sandelowski 1993 p. 1).

Sandelowski's argument is both compelling and evocative. She conceptualises qualitative research as a bridge between science and art, and thus the artfulness of a study is just as important to measuring its quality as the validity of the data: "good qualitative data reduction grabs the 'essence' of a phenomenon." Sandelowski falls into the third category proposed by Hope and Waterman (2003) - that of the researcher who proposes that no pre-determined criteria should be set to gauge the quality of qualitative research and that each study should be judged on its individual merits by the people that read its findings. The onus is placed on this community of readers – often a community of peers – to assess the quality of the research based on the auditability of the "decision trail" left by the researcher. The ability of readers to assess the quality of the work is of course reliant on the research process being both transparent and accessible.

This thesis adopts an approach closest to that of Sandelowski. In line with the debates in the literature already discussed in this section, my research project is

implicitly tied to the ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research, explained earlier, which then serve to operationalise my research aims. Rather than using the data from the interviews I conducted to make truth claims about the nature of race or whiteness, I am more interested in the narratives that my participants create to explain or interpret their experiences and the impact that these experiences have on their perception of their racial identity. I have also grounded my analysis firmly in the theoretical frameworks provided by scholarship on whiteness and racialisation, and have attempted to ensure congruence between the theoretical and methodological claims of my research question. The following sections explain the methods used in more depth, and the research decisions that were made to ensure that the participants were given the opportunity to share their stories in a manner that would capture the authenticity of their narratives. In order to make my research process as transparent and auditable as possible, I also discuss the key limitations of my research and how I navigated the challenges they presented, particularly with regard to my own positionality.

3.4 Research Method

As mentioned earlier, this research project utilised in-depth, semi-structured interviews to foreground the nuances and complexities of the experiences of white converts to Islam. Using this research method allowed the participants to be a central and integral part of the research project, and gave them the opportunity to tell their stories of race and racialisation in their own words, guided by open-ended questions. This section details the specific research design that I employed and outlines the various stages of my fieldwork, from

my recruitment strategy, to the data collection and transcription, through to the analysis of the interview transcripts.

3.4.1 Participant recruitment

When I began the recruitment process for this project, I employed three key sampling criteria in my advertising: participants must be Muslim, they must have converted to Islam from another faith position, and they must identify as white. While all three criteria relied on participants' self-identification, the third criterion specified that along with participants identifying as white themselves, they should also reasonably believe that they are generally perceptible as white to others in the broader Australian community. A final criterion limiting recruitment to the geographical area of Sydney was introduced later on, due to the funding and time limitations of the PhD project. I initially intended to interview thirty participants who met all four criteria.

A criterion based on race was both crucial for the aims of the project, and also problematic because of the very nature of race as a socio-culturally defined category, as I illustrated in Chapter Two. During my Honours year in which I did a similar study, I relied solely on self-identification, and encountered some issues in two cases where participants self-identified as white (at least partly) but due to their physical appearance were not treated as white by others. In both of these cases, the participants switched between referring to themselves as being white and being Aboriginal in one case, and being white and being Jamaican in another. This complicated the data analysis process somewhat, and exposed a significant limitation in my recruitment strategy which had not accounted for mixed-descent or bicultural participants. It is for this reason that I added a second criterion as well as that of self-identification to the criterion that participants must be white. While problems still exist within this model, the

addition of the extra qualification appears to have had the intended effect, as the same complications did not arise during the current project.

Three strategies for recruiting white Muslim converts to the study were used in this research project; snowball sampling, communication platforms such as Facebook and online forums, and approaching key people within relevant community organisations and mosques to advertise my project verbally and through printed advertisements placed around their premises. Initially, participants were recruited using non-probability purposive sampling methods. After the first seventeen participants had been interviewed, my sampling strategy necessarily became more targeted and selective. I identified demographic gaps within the participant sample that I had already recruited that I felt would be detrimental to the overall research aims of the project, and altered my recruitment methods to address the identified gaps.

The most successful of the three strategies was snowball sampling, whereby I utilised my pre-existing social and community networks within Sydney by receiving referrals from respondents and other key people within the Muslim community. Snowball sampling originally emerged as a strategy to recruit hidden or hard-to-reach population groups, often when studying phenomena that may be sensitive, criminal or otherwise difficult to observe (Hendricks & Blanken 1992). Using chain-referrals from a smaller group of identified participants utilises the social networks of those participants to widen the pool of participants which the researcher has access to. While white Muslim converts were not necessarily "hidden" in the way Hendricks and Blanken envisioned, snowball sampling allowed me to find participants who didn't visibly identify as Muslim through their clothes, such as the *ḥijāb* for women or *kufi* or *thawb* for men, and who retained their birth names rather than changing their names to a more "Muslim" sounding names – typically, Arabic names. It also allowed me

to recruit participants who did not engage very much with the mainstream Sydney Muslim community and did not use popular communication platforms or have contacts with religious organisations.

While this strategy was effective, the initial group that emerged was not as diverse as I had hoped. There were a wide range of ages and geographical locations represented in the group, ranging from 21 to 73 years of age, living in areas of Sydney that included Greater Western Sydney, the Northern Beaches, Sutherland Shire and the Inner West. Men and women were fairly equally represented, and the ancestries of the participants varied, from British and Irish to French, Italian and Swedish. Where the heterogeneity was lacking was in the class and education backgrounds of the participants. In the initial group of seventeen participants, most were educated to a tertiary level, and besides two, all were employed and identified as middle-class. It was difficult to ascertain whether or not this reflected the demographic of the larger Muslim convert population, due to the lack of empirical data about Muslim converts in Australia.

The lack of diversity in the initial group of participants was expected, as the selection bias that can result when using snowball sampling is well documented in the literature (Atkinson and Flint 2001, Van Meter 1990, Kaplan et al 1987), and it is likely that the nature of the initial participant group explains this sampling. People within similar social classes and with similar educational backgrounds are more likely to develop social networks with one another, and so the referrals received from participants are weighted towards those demographics. Another issue identified by Griffiths et al (1993) and Van Meter (1990) is that the participant group will reflect those who have relationships with other members of the group, and not those who are excluded or more on the fringes, or "isolates" (Van Meter 1990). Griffiths et al (1993) argue that this

process can thus over-emphasise group cohesiveness, because of its reliance on chains and networks.

These challenges required me to adopt new and varied strategies to identify participants of different socio-economic status. At the same time as sampling through the social networks of people I knew within the community, I approached community organisations that I knew to work specifically with Muslim converts to enlist their help by placing fliers around their premises and informing their members about my project. In Sydney, the key organisations I identified were the Islamic Sciences and Research Association (ISRA), Australian New Muslim Association (ANMA), and Australian Muslim Women's Association (AMWA), as organisations that worked primarily with converts or had dedicated classes or programs for converts. ISRA and AMWA were receptive to my project, but I was unsuccessful in developing a research relationship with ANMA, despite a number of emails and phone calls over a period of several months in 2013-2014. The lack of response from ANMA appeared to be due primarily to a shortage of staff and volunteers involved in the organisation during that period, but may also have been due to my inability to make contact with a senior person within the organisation who may have acted as a gatekeeper. While the people I spoke to allowed me to send copies of my recruitment flyers, I was unable to establish if they had been distributed, and none of the participants I interviewed stated that they had been referred to me from ANMA.

Overall, however, only a very small number of participants were recruited through these and other organisations. Referrals from social networks were more effective than advertisements placed in the organisations' offices. In order to avoid the suggestion of coercion, I asked the staff at these community organisations to tell their members about their project, but to avoid encouraging

them to attend, in case their members felt pressured to participate in order to maintain a good relationship with the organisation. It is debatable whether their lack of encouragement or enthusiasm about the project may have had the opposite effect; in dissuading members to participate as they may have assumed that the staff did not think it worthwhile for them. It is also important to note that the converts that attended the classes or were members of the organisations targeted were not all white. For example, a representative of ISRA related to me that most of the converts that came to their classes were of Chinese background.

The demographic data of the participants recruited through organisations did not deviate significantly from the overall demographic data of the initial group of seventeen, and so in this way it was ineffective in counteracting the selection bias of the snowball sampling method. The class and education backgrounds of participants recruited through organisations were by and large the same as those recruited through snowball sampling. After discussing my frustration with other researchers and community members, I found that anecdotally, ANMA was the best organisation to go to recruit converts from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to the counselling, financial support and emergency accommodation they offer. For this reason, I continued to try and build a relationship with ANMA, albeit unsuccessfully.

The third strategy was to utilise Internet communication platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, websites and online forums, as the Internet can be an attractive avenue to access Islam for new Muslims who may not have many other ties to the community due to barriers such as geographical distance or a lack of networks. Brazilian scholars Vitória Peres de Oliveira and Cecília Mariz found that a significant number of the converts in their study first found Islam through the internet, and only later attended a mosque or met Muslims in

person (2006, p. 109). De Oliveira and Mariz also posit that many of their participants found a greater sense of community and belonging online than they did in their local areas, because their local mosques and religious scholars often promoted more orthodox readings of Islam than they were comfortable with, compared to online spaces that they believed to be more inclusive. De Oliveira and Mariz state:

> The internet has not only diffused Islam, but it seems to be also supporting converted people maintain their new faith [sic]. Conversion is a process which requires a community supports [sic] and mechanism to maintain it. A converted woman declared she prefers to go to the Islamic site than to the mosque. A virtual community widely known amongst the Brazilian Muslim women is a site organized by Maria Amoreira. She lives in a Muslim country, but her site is in Portuguese (2006, p. 109).

Karin van Nieuwkerk's chapter on women converts in the West includes similar findings to that of de Oliveira and Mariz, indicating that American Muslim converts used the Internet both to find out information about Islam in the initial stages of their conversion journey, and to consolidate and strengthen their newfound Muslim identity after conversion (2006, p. 113).

The findings of my own research project share several similarities with that of de Oliveira and Mariz (2006) and van Nieurwerk (2006), with several participants stating that the Internet was instrumental in their conversion. Despite the fact that online message boards were often referred to in interviews as being a key space of engagement for converts, only one of the participants I recruited for my project had discovered the project through my advertisement on an Internet forum on Muslimvillage.com. This could perhaps be explained by suggestions from some participants that the use of online message boards is in decline following the advent of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as well as smartphones. Twitter was not useful in my recruitment

strategy, partly because of the character limit placed on tweets (140 characters) which restricts how much you can adequately convey, and also because of the specificity of the group I was trying to recruit, which may not have been represented in my own followers or the followers of my followers. Facebook was much more fruitful. I targeted active Facebook groups dedicated to Australian Muslim converts and Sydney Muslims, and received a number of emails from converts or people who knew converts who had seen my post, some of which eventuated into interviews.

A fourth and unintended method of recruitment was through attending community events, conferences and other large-scale gatherings. At these events, I found myself networking and discussing my project with people, and if anyone expressed an interest in participating or referred a friend or relative, I shared my business card. As an ethical requirement, additional information about the project, what participation would involve, and how the results would be disseminated was emailed to anyone who contacted me via any of the above recruitment strategies.

The recruitment phase of the project was successful overall. The twenty-nine interviews that were conducted were rich in data and precluded the need for more interviews. The major limitation of the recruitment phase and the participant sample that emerged from it was in the lack of socioeconomic diversity amongst the participants. It is possible that with more time spent developing a relationship of trust with particular organisations in Sydney, this could have been overcome, but as the significance of the limitation was only discovered in the later stages of fieldwork, the time frame proved to be prohibitive. Additionally, it has not been confirmed that the lack of socioeconomic diversity in fact does constitute a limitation of the data. In the absence of a reliable quantitative data set containing demographic information

about Muslim converts in Australia, it is also plausible that the socioeconomic homogeneity of my participant group may simply reflect the characteristics of the broader group of Australian Muslim converts.

3.4.2 The interview process

Once participants read and agreed to the participant information sheet (Appendix B) and understood what was expected of them, we arranged a suitable time and place for the interview. The final choice of location was left to the participant, but I offered a range of options for them including booking a room at Western Sydney University (WSU) or the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) where I had access to rooms as teaching staff, their homes or workplaces, or a local library or quiet café. I emphasised to participants that I was able to travel to wherever was most convenient for them, at a time that suited them. Most of the interviews took place in participants' homes or at UTS, but cafes, private rooms in libraries, WSU, Macquarie University and workplaces were also utilised. Women were more likely to invite me to their homes. Organising interviews with men required more thought and deliberation due to the restrictions that some may have felt with regards to being alone in a closed room with me for reasons of faith, but proved to be easy to navigate. While none of the male participants stated that they felt it might be a problem or asked specifically to meet in a public space, I made sure to offer options that were largely public or semi-public; for example, the rooms I used at UTS all had glass walls and were soundproof. In the one instance where an interview took place at a male participant's home, his wife was also present in another part of the apartment. When conducting the interviews at a person's house, I would offer a small gift in the way of biscuits or a gift for their house or their child, as is customary amongst Muslims. If the interview took part in

another place, I offered to buy them a coffee or other beverage, which was usually accepted by the participant.

The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between one to three hours, with the majority of interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and questions focused on the participants' personal histories, introduction to Islam and circumstances surrounding their conversion, experiences within Muslim and non-Muslim communities, understandings and experiences of race and whiteness, and racism and discrimination. The interview questions were designed to operationalise the research aims using a combination of primary and secondary questions, structural questions, probing questions and interpreting questions (Kvale 1996). The interview schedule (Appendix D) was used as a guide to help ensure that I covered the areas I had identified as being most pertinent to the research aims. By developing an interview schedule and including it in my thesis, the process of operationalising my aims and generating my data is made transparent and auditable.

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed me to deviate from the schedule to pursue a line of questioning further, to clarify responses and to explore aspects of participants' narratives that I had not anticipated or were unique or interesting. The semi-structured interview strategy enabled me to capture the nuance and complexity of their narratives using a conversational and fluid tone, whilst also giving participants a sense of structure, which was appreciated by those participants who were unsure about what to expect from an interview or where to begin. The interviews began with general introductory and descriptive questions, moving on to more targeted and personal questions later on in the interview, using the 'funnelling' or 'pyramid' technique described by Dunn (2000). These initial questions served their purpose, and

allowed the participants to slowly relax and feel a sense of ease, trust and confidence in telling me their story, even though they did not provide much pertinent data, with the exception of one or two participants. It was important to build this initial rapport as some of the questions I asked later on were of a personal nature, and I was aware that they may give rise to feelings of discomfort.

It is important to note here again that the project was not concerned with reasons for why participants converted, but their experiences following their conversion as they related to race and racialisation. As illustrated by the review of the literature found in Chapter Two, this is an area that is currently under-researched. Thus, I avoided asking participants explicitly about the motivations behind their conversion, although most participants did offer explanations when describing how they came to find out about and convert to Islam. This strategy was undertaken in light of my analysis of the literature about Muslim converts (found in Chapter Four), which I believed already contained a thorough review of the motivators for conversion amongst Muslim converts. My primary concern was ensuring that my interview schedule operationalised my research aims as effectively and efficiently as possible.

In retrospect, I believe that I should have asked explicit questions about participants' reasons for converting to Islam. Although there is substantial research on the topic in many parts of the world, there is very little in the way of comprehensive academic research that has emerged from Australia. By the time that I decided that it was important to include a chapter on participants' conversion narratives in this thesis to further address the paucity of literature on Australian Muslim converts and establish a context for their later experiences, I had almost finished collecting my data and had conducted a sizeable portion of the analysis. While I was able to collect a significant amount

of data, my lack of explicit emphasis on that subject during the interviews meant that the data was more limited than it may have been if I had begun the interviews with the intention of finding out participants' motivations for conversion.

Instead, questions about when and how participants first heard about Islam, what piqued their interest in the religion and what steps they took prior to and after converting to learn more about Islam were introduced early in the interview for the primary purpose of simply gaining some contextual knowledge about the participant. The background questions were followed by questions about how the participants' family and friends responded to their conversion. This was a topic area that needed to be dealt with carefully as for some participants it was a sensitive issue and brought up negative emotions and memories. As well as posing an ethical risk given the amount of discomfort it could elicit amongst participants, it was also likely that some participants may try to avoid the question, or give a dismissive answer, and so it required some negotiation on my part to find a balance between encouraging participants to find a way to tell their story in their own time, with some delicate probing questions, and not pressuring them to answer if they looked uncomfortable or upset. Initially, I was concerned that questions around racism and discrimination would elicit distress, a risk that I flagged in my ethics application, but those questions ultimately had a lesser impact on participants than questions about familial reactions to their conversion.

Another important ethical consideration for this project was anonymity, although the significance that the participants themselves placed on it varied from person to person. Each participant was instructed that a pseudonym would be used in place of their real name, and so they could speak freely and openly about their experiences. Some participants stated that they did not mind

if their real names were used, but for the purposes of consistency each participant was given a pseudonym. Others were cautious about revealing too much information until they verified that their real names or other identifying information such as their workplaces would not be exposed in the thesis, after which time they became much more open about their experiences. Some participants revealed information about themselves during the interview that could have easily identified them to others even if their real names were not used, as they were prominent members of the Sydney Muslim community. Examples included their professions or workplaces, involvement in projects or the establishment of facilities such as mosques and educational centres. In these cases I asked the participants what they would prefer I do if identifiable information from their transcripts appeared in a quotation that was later used in the thesis. All the participants stated that they did not mind if it was used, but they were still given the option to review the transcripts and remove the information if desired.

I began to transcribe the recorded interviews during the interview stage of my project. Transcribing all the interviews myself helped me to identify these and similar issues and flag them with participants early on, as well as allowing me to develop strategies to manage these issues in later interviews. As well as funding limitations, this was one of the key reasons that I chose to undertake the transcription process myself rather than hiring someone external to the project. By transcribing interviews in between conducting interviews, I could also identify gaps and errors in my questioning style and adjust for the next interviews accordingly. It allowed me to gauge whether the data I received from the questions I asked was helping me to operationalise my research aims, or whether I needed to rephrase questions or take a different line of questioning.

Participants were given the option to review the transcripts and make amendments if they felt any were necessary prior to the analysis stage. These 'member checks' as they are known are often used by qualitative researchers as a strategy to improve the credibility and overall trustworthiness of a research project, by allowing participants the option to verify whether their stories were accurately and 'authentically' represented by the researcher (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Telling participants that it was an option before the interview began also helped to dispel unease among some people who stated that they had previously had problems where they had been misquoted or misrepresented in the news media as well as in academic work. Even among those who did not have concerns about being misrepresented, being given the option to read their transcripts appeared to help some people relax and become more open as a result, as it signalled to them that it was important to me to record their stories accurately, and I believe that they felt more able to trust me as a result.

Member checks are not without controversy, however. Sandelowski (1993, p. 4) vigorously rejects member checking, positing it as a "threat to validity" due to the "deeply theoretical and ethical difficulties involved in this technique that may serve paradoxically to undermine the trustworthiness of a project." The reasons for this, she states, lie in the fact that both researchers and their participants have an interest in representing certain versions of reality, and so their ideas of what constitutes a "fair account" may differ widely, meaning that the accuracy of a person's experiences becomes deeply contested territory. Additionally, participants may forget things that they said during an interview and later challenge the transcript, which is arguably more 'accurate' than the participant's recollection of the interview as it captured the participant's emotions or recollections at that moment in time. Sandelowski raises salient issues regarding the nature and role that member checks take. In my own

research, participants were provided with the option of reviewing their transcripts, rather than being required to, and only four participants did ask to see their transcripts afterwards. Participants were only given the option to check the transcripts – they were not given the analysed transcripts, or copies of pages from the thesis where their interview data was used. This meant that participants only had the chance to review their own words and how they represented their stories, not how that data was then analysed, coded and converted into a new narrative constructed by me. Out of the four who were sent their transcripts, only one made changes, and they were of a clarifying nature.

3.4.3 Analysis of data

After the twenty-nine interviews were transcribed, they underwent a process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis attempts to identify patterns within the data and categorise or 'code' the data according to these patterns or themes, thereby looking to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within each transcript. An initial coding framework was developed using a combination of theory-driven codes that reflected my research aims and inductive codes stemming from the transcripts themselves. This coding framework did change over time and incorporate emerging themes throughout the coding process. The final coding framework consisted of 9 parent categories with a number of sub-codes that ultimately formed the basis of the discussion chapters of this thesis. The coding framework can be found in Appendix E.

The analysis itself was conducted with the help of the qualitative coding software Dedoose. The coding framework was created within the program and

the interview data imported, then coded manually. Several excerpts from the interview transcripts were categorised under multiple codes, highlighting the depth and richness of the data and the diverse meanings that could be found in each segment of interview. The process of coding and categorising the interview data allowed me to become became familiar with the interview data, which made the latter processes of analysis and writing more efficient and allowed for greater consistency in coding. Additionally, by utilising a coding framework and providing it with this thesis, I am able to leave an auditable research trail, leading to more transparent and trustworthy research.

3.5 Researcher Positionality

As a researcher engaged in qualitative research, I begin with the premise that the researcher is central to the research process, and thus reflexive and critical thinking about my positionality as a researcher was a necessary and important aspect of my research practice. Denzin (1986, p. 12) states that "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher"; in other words, the culmination of the lived experiences of a researcher shape his or her ontological, epistemological and methodological philosophies and research choices. This is significant not just with regards to the trustworthiness of my findings, but also to understand and explain the personal and political aspects of knowledge production. Taking up Daly's call to critically reflect "on the ways that we bring to the research our own position of privilege, our vulnerabilities, and ideological commitments" (2007, p. 201), this section is dedicated to interrogating how the fluid and contingent nature of both mine and my participants' subjectivities saw my status shift from "insider" to

"outsider" from one interview to the next, and indeed from one minute to the next within an interview.

There has been considerable discussion amongst researchers, particularly ethnographers, about the relative importance of the researcher's position as insider or outsider to the field in question (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Merton 1972; Rose 1997; Serrant-Green 2002). Increasingly, research is carried out by people who are already part of the group they are studying, compared to 'outsiders' who are non-members of the group being researched prior to the start of the study. This shift from traditional modes of ethnography can be attributed to the work of feminist and post-colonial standpoint theorists, who contend that because knowledge is socially situated, members of the (often marginalised) groups that are being studied are best placed to undertake the research in question (Alcoff 1991; Collins 1990; Harding 1991; Hartsock 2004). They argue that outsiders do not have the necessary cultural understanding or empathy needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of social groups that they are not part of, particularly in cases of advantaged researchers studying minority social groups, where there is significant power differential. On the flipside, insiders face the challenge of needing to sufficiently distance themselves from the phenomena and social groups they are embedded within, to avoid "the corrupting influences of group loyalties upon the human understanding" (Merton 1972, p. 122).

The so-called insider/outsider dichotomy is challenged by scholars such as Dwyer and Buckle (2009), who suggest that qualitative research has seen a blurring of the lines between 'insider' and 'outsider'. They argue that the establishment of a dichotomy fails to acknowledge that people can occupy multiple subjectivities at any given time, influenced by the prevailing social, political and cultural context in which the interaction is taking place. Those who

reject the insider/outsider dichotomy emphasise what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) call "the space between," creating a framework in which all researchers fall somewhere in between complete insiders and complete outsiders, depending on the context of the research project. Researchers assume a responsibility to understand where they are positioned within this space and to explore how their status may affect the research process and its outcomes (Serrant-Green 2002).

During the process of recruitment and conducting my interviews, I had a strong sense of occupying this "space between." As a Muslim with relatively strong ties within the Sydney community, I knew that I would likely have greater access to a diverse range of participants than an outsider – and probably inspire more trust as well. However, I was also acutely aware of being an outsider with regards to the target group in many respects. I was raised Muslim in a Muslim family, and so I understood that there would be significant differences between my own experiences and those of my participants who had adopted Islam at a later age, sometimes well into their 40s. I had an idea what some of these differences might be in advance – my husband is a Muslim convert, and because I met him six months after he converted I shared in much of his now almost ten year journey.

More compelling however was the fact that I am a non-white researcher interviewing white participants about their whiteness and racial identity. When discussing issues of race with white people in non-research settings before, I had encountered a spectrum of reactions: from guilt and shame to acceptance to defensiveness, anger and denial. I was therefore anxious about how the topics of race, whiteness and white privilege would be received by my participants. It was clear that for the majority of my participants, the topic made them uncomfortable. Questions about whiteness or race saw many respondents

avoiding eye contact or looking down at their hands or the table, others would laugh nervously. Most of them spoke hesitantly and did not seem confident about answering questions about race. While all of them attempted to answer my questions about race and whiteness, three of them stopped midway through their sentences when responding to explicit questions about race and their own racial identity, and stated that they did not know how to answer. Of those that did answer, their answers were often short or jumbled, as though they were unsure how to respond or worried about offending me.

The participants did not explicitly express that my presence as a non-white interviewer was the cause of their discomfort, and it is possible that they would have struggled with the questions regardless of who was interviewing them. However, it is salient to note my positionality at these junctures because of how I interpreted their response, which may have impacted on the interview dynamic more general. At those times, I felt very much like an outsider, someone who the participants did not quite know how to interact with and tiptoed around. This was jarring given that at other times they would freely use Arabic words, talk about Islamic concepts or practices or refer to things that had happened within or to the community very openly and without hesitation. As a dark-skinned researcher who wears a headscarf, it was visibly apparent that I was both Muslim and non-white, which influenced how participants responded to me at different parts of the interview. My status constantly shifted between insider and outsider between and within interviews as participants revealed more about themselves to me - and I revealed more about myself to them - through the questions I asked and the conversation we had in the midst of the formal interview.

Ultimately, working in that in-between space was the inevitable outcome of occupying multiple subject positions. My experience was supported by the

theories of Serrant-Green (2002) and Dwyer and Buckle (2009) who emphasise the relational and dynamic aspects of researchers' positionalities, noting that "the question of identity of the researcher in relation to the subject and group under study is constantly changing and not fixed" (Serrant-Green 2002, p. 42). After the interviews, I wondered if my participants' responses to questions about race would have been different had I been white; perhaps they wouldn't have felt as uneasy or constrained by political correctness. I wonder too if the ones that expressed guilt would have felt such a strong need to explain how much they resented their whiteness.

In attempting to find out how other researchers dealt with this issue, I came to discover that the area of minority researchers studying dominant groups is under-theorised; with the vast majority of literature on 'outsider' research being about members of dominant groups studying members of less privileged groups. This phenomenon was termed 'studying up' by anthropologist Laura Nader in her book "Up the Anthropologist" where she called upon researchers to undertake the "study of the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty" (1972 p. 289). Studying up is not without its challenges: in her research on class and race in Jamaica, Lisa Anderson-Levy discusses experiencing suspicion about why a black woman would want to study whiteness (2010). Anderson-Levy opines that she "definitely occupied the position of lesser status in the majority of field exchanges" (2010, p. 185):

> I was younger than many of the people I interviewed, had less financial resources, less social status, did not live in Jamaica, and am Black. This meant that it was a struggle to get people to agree to talk with me and when they did, they were often hostile… When people agreed to talk with me, in the vast majority of exchanges, I was the subordinate partner; the one with less status (Anderson-Levy 2010, p. 185)

My own experience was not as loaded as Anderson-Levy's, likely because there were fewer major differences between my own subjectivities and my participants, or perhaps they weren't as apparent during the interviews because our shared experiences of being part of a Muslim minority in Australia overrode other considerations. Additionally, I could also easily frame my research as "studying down" as much as "studying up," as a non-convert interviewing a convert in a community where converts are in the minority. I was aware that despite attempts to diversify my participant base as mentioned previously, many of my participants had completed higher education and were similarly placed to me with regards to class. One participant, Liam, made a number of references to his socio-economic background throughout the interview, specifically to his lack of employment and residence in a low-rent area. He referred to his class to support his argument that his race did not privilege him in any way. I was acutely aware of my own class privilege in relationship to his during this part of the interview, while simultaneously analysing his refusal to acknowledge that his whiteness afforded him any privilege relative to me. The interview with Liam was one in which I felt most like an outsider, and had the interesting experience of concurrently studying up, sideways and down. The added distance from the subject of the interview had its benefits; when transcribing his interview, I realised that I had asked more questions, and much more probing questions, in order to better understand his experiences.

Other times that I was positioned as an outsider were when participants discussed challenges that they faced as a convert, particularly when they talked about issues that they had had with 'born' Muslims – Muslims who were born into a Muslim family and were raised Muslim - or Muslims from particular cultural groups. Some participants would hesitate before bringing these issues

up, gloss over them or qualify their statements, perhaps presuming that I was not a convert or that I was from one of those cultural groups and wanting to avoid offending me. I found myself mentioning that I was married to a white convert myself during interviews to counteract their hesitance - while this did not shift me into the insider category, it did seem to put them more at ease and more comfortable to talk about their negative experiences within the community more openly.

As an insider, I felt that I was well-placed to identify an appropriate research question, and had ready access to research participants through already-established networks and pre-existing relationships with community organisations that assisted me in reaching out to participants. I also felt that my insider status emboldened participants to trust me and open up to me more than they may have an outsider, particularly around questions of racism and discrimination and elements of practice. As a Muslim researcher, they may have assumed that I would not use their stories to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Muslims or push an agenda that might harm Muslims.

However, there are also some risks and disadvantages to being an insider, which have been less comprehensively explored in the literature (Hurd and McIntyre 1996, p. 78). Being part of the community meant that I already knew a number of the participants I interviewed in some capacity or other, having seen them at community events or interacted with them online on a message board or Facebook group. I wondered to what extent they may stifle or adapt their narratives to account for the fact that we had had contact in the past and may again in the future. I also found that sometimes participants left things unsaid as they assumed that they would be obvious to an insider, and I was not always able to think quickly enough to ask them for clarification or to explain further. If I were an outsider, however, they may have explained their point more clearly

and comprehensively, and this is a risk that Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss in their work on qualitative research.

One salient challenge presented by 'insider status' is the potential to allow the 'sameness' of researcher and participant to obscure the research process, as insider researchers are perceived as "being innately biased and unable to raise provocative questions because of their closeness to the culture and subjects of study" (Bilecen 2013, p. 53). Hurd and McIntyre (1996) suggest that where the researcher and the participant share common experiences and understandings, the researcher may be less inclined to critically examine the participants' stories during the interview or focus group itself, and may even add credence to the participant's worldview either implicitly or by referring to their own, similar, experiences. When listening to recordings of my interviews in the days and weeks following the interview, I occasionally felt frustrated with myself for not questioning participants more thoroughly about particular topics or challenging their assumptions, realising that it was often due to complacency on my part that I was familiar enough with their arguments to not probe any deeper. Hurd and McIntyre argue that this becomes problematic in research because "*sameness* distances the participants (researcher and researched) from a critical reflexive research process" and that "the stillness of sameness is an illusion that conceals inherent disparities in social science research" (1996, p. 78). In such circumstances, there is a risk that researchers can tacitly endorse privileged experiences and perspectives that they themselves share, something that I may have contributed to through my insider status and similarities with participants.

I also found that I was anxious to prove myself as not just any insider but an "authentic insider." In one of the very first interviews I did, I found myself

dressing much more conservatively than I normally would, as I had no prior knowledge about the participant. In that scenario, I decided that taking the most conservative option would garner the most favourable response. The pressure of the interview was heightened because not only did I want her to open up to me, she was a person who ran convert classes at a local Islamic organisation, and so would potentially be able to refer more people to me if she felt I was trustworthy and worth talking to. If she had not held a position at an Islamic organisation, I may not have felt as much of a need to dress more conservatively.

The biggest challenges of being an insider, however, are the expectations that community members may have of the researcher, including the expectation that the researcher will represent the community in a favourable light. Abdi Kusow (2003) found this in his ethnography of Somali immigrants in Canada. Referring to one man he approached, he states: "He started to advise me about the proper things to write about the Somali community in Canada. He said that I should write about the good things, about how the Somali community in Canada is very clean and not involved in criminal activities like selling drugs, about our beautiful culture, about how Somalia before the war was a great country..." (Kusow 2003, p. 595). When the man read the questions and thought they were too 'negative', he declined the offer to participate. In my own research, the results were mixed. Some participants were hesitant to say anything negative about the community, or were quick to qualify anything negative they did say. However, many were also very open in condemning specific practices or attitudes within the community. Still others were quiet about negative experiences during their interviews, but 'off the record' told me stories that they had heard about converts being exploited, or discussed with me politics within the community. Again, my positionality as an insider was both beneficial in

some ways and a hindrance in others, and the findings of this research project need to be read in this light.

In this section, I have detailed the ways in which I felt my researcher positionality and movement between insider and outsider status may have influenced the research process, particularly during the data collection stage. In doing so, I have highlighted possible limitations of this research project, and specific concerns for researchers who are studying communities 'from the inside.' By elucidating my positionality and articulating the risks and benefits it poses to the research, I have aimed to make my research more transparent, auditable and ultimately, more trustworthy.

3.6 Conclusion

In line with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of my research question, aims and objectives, this study utilised the qualitative method of in-depth interviews to foreground the experiences, words, attitudes and beliefs of white converts to Islam. My approach to the data privileges and draws out the nuance, depth and complexity of their narratives, rather than attempting to present a more generalised or overarching 'big picture' of the experiences of white Muslim converts. This is illustrated in the remainder of the thesis, which aspires to the 'artfulness' model proposed by Sandelowski (2005); it seeks to achieve verisimilitude of their stories in a respectful way and one that maintains the integrity of those stories, while acknowledging that a completely 'true' representation of reality is not possible.

This chapter detailed the research method used from participant recruitment through to data analysis, in an attempt to make the research process as transparent and 'auditable' as possible. It also explained why this transparency

is particularly important in qualitative research where the concepts of validity and reliability are not so readily testable. Instead, it is the trustworthiness of the project which is at stake, and to be assessed by those who read the findings produced and disseminated from the research. A key part of this process was to explain my own positionality as a researcher and how this affected the research process; the ethical quandaries it posed and the limitations and challenges, as well as advantages, which arose as a result of my fluctuating insider/outsider status. It is hoped that my detailed and transparent account of the research design and my candid discussion of the limitations, flaws and problems of the research project will allow my peers to effectively assess the quality of my qualitative research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION

4.1 Introduction

The people I interviewed during the course of this study all had two things in common, despite the diversity in their ages, locations and socioeconomic backgrounds that I outlined in Chapter Three. Firstly, all of the participants identified with the racial identity of 'white,' insofar as they responded to recruitment material that explicitly sought white Muslims for the research project. As following chapters will illustrate, however, this category was sometimes rejected, often contested, and always complicated by the participants. Less controversially, though not without its own nuances and contradictions, each participant also found resonance in the category of 'Muslim convert': a person who had adopted Islam as their religion of choice and in doing so had left another religion or a position of non-belief in religion. For many of those interviewed, the label of convert was purely an academic one; having been Muslim for enough time to feel that the label no longer had any practical application to their lives except in how other Muslims responded to them. For others, often newer Muslims, it remained a prominent part of their identity.

This chapter details the key conversion narratives that emerged from the interviews, as well as the circumstances surrounding participants' conversion. As the first of four chapters that analyses the lived experiences of the participants of this project, the following pages provide the contextual background needed to thoroughly and holistically understand their post-

conversion experiences. Participants' descriptions of their experiences leading up to their conversion reveals additional information about their worldviews at the time they entered Islam, their perception of self and identity, and their pre-existing knowledge of Islam and Muslims in general, and Muslim communities in Australia specifically. In this chapter, I focus on three key elements of participants' pre-conversion lives that I argue are illustrative of these beliefs and understandings: participants' religious identities prior to becoming Muslim, their contact with Muslims and knowledge of Islam, and their motivations or reasons for converting to Islam. These elements are preceded by a review of the literature on Muslim converts, particularly in Western nations such as Australia. Thus, this chapter serves as an introduction to their lives, to be built upon in later chapters which analyse their experiences *as* Muslims in greater depth.

It must be emphasised early on that the motivations for why participants converted was not the focus of this research project. As I will demonstrate through my summary of the literature, there is already an abundance of sociological, psychological and historical research on the reasons why people convert to Islam, and far less literature on the experiences of new Muslims after their conversion. The imbalance I discovered is to some extent reflected in the experiences of the participants of this project, some of whom expressed frustration at being asked about their conversion story whenever they met a Muslim for the first time. I also witnessed this asymmetry when I spoke to non-Muslims about my research. Although I would always stress that my thesis was about converts' post-conversion lives, in nine out of ten cases the first question I was asked was, "But, tell me, *why* did they convert?" Oftentimes, their questioning appeared to stem from an almost Orientalist fascination seeking to

determine why a white person would join a religion that was perceived to be so culturally disparate and 'exotic' as Islam.

It became clear to me very early on that the academic literature reflected this trend, and that there was a general ambivalence about the joys, struggles and banality of converts' lives after their conversion. In an attempt to avoid legitimising a voyeuristic Orientalist interest in why white people convert to Islam, and to address the gap in the literature and avoid repetition of existing scholarship, I chose to focus on the post-conversion experiences of the converts, and placed less emphasis on the actual conversion process and reasons for conversion. This research decision not only enabled me to make an empirical contribution to the literature on religious conversion, it also allowed for the furtherance and development of new conceptual frames through which to understand conversion to Islam, outside of Orientalist paradigms.

I ensured however that the interview schedule I designed still allowed conversion narratives to emerge throughout the interviews, and they did, though perhaps not as explicitly as they would have had I asked participants directly about their 'reasons' for converting. It is these stories that are detailed in this chapter. Despite my reservations, I believe that it is important to include the narratives provided by converts about the circumstances surrounding their conversion in this thesis, not to indulge Orientalist curiosity but to help to provide a foundational framework for understanding their post-conversion realities. The following section details the existing literature on Muslim converts, demonstrating that much of the focus of previous literature has been on the motivations for conversion, with less emphasis on post-conversion lives. Through a thorough review of the literature, I demonstrate that there is a significant lack of published research about Muslim converts in Australia, and

argue that this thesis helps to fill that absence by contributing convert voices to the literature about Muslims in Australia more generally.

4.2 Muslim Converts in the Literature

Academic research on conversion to Islam has traditionally taken one of two approaches, with some outliers. The first approach takes a historical perspective by focusing on the 'Islamisation' of geographical regions across the Eurasian and African continents, as its peoples came into contact with Muslim empires including, but not limited to, the Umayyad, Mughal, Songhai and Ottoman empires (Baer 2004, Levtzion 1979, Mathew 1982, Mazur 2009, Talbot 2009). In his summary of theories of religious conversion, American theologian, sociologist and psychologist Lewis Rambo notes that studies of this nature highlight the "creation of social, cultural, religious and political environments in which individuals, families, communities, and societies flourish as Islamic" (1999, p. 268). In other words, the focus is less on individual psychological or spiritual motivators to convert to Islam, but on the socio-political context in which the conversion takes place. Factors such as increased political and social capital, tax benefits, expediency in trade through marriage and better treatment for slaves are emphasised in this conversion framework, which is more concerned with the material benefits that the group as a whole accrues, rather than the motivations of individuals within the community.

William Bulliet refers to this type of conversion as 'adhesion' or pragmatic communal conversion (Bulliet 1979) that signalled a "change in fellowship" that marked a socio-political shift as much as a religious one (Hardy 1977). The body of literature on communal conversion makes up the majority of the scholarship on conversion to Islam, but while historically and sociologically

significant, it is only marginally relevant to my research project. Although there is no reliable quantitative dataset on the exact numbers of Muslim converts in Australia, the minimal growth of Muslims in Australia documented in the 2011 Census (ABS 2011) indicates that conversion to Islam in Australia does not constitute the wide-scale, mass conversion that occurs through Islamisation through empire. Indeed, communal conversions are by now relegated to history, as previously collective institutions such as religion become increasingly individualised in line with the dominant ideologies of the modern era. The 'adhesion' framework is clearly ill-equipped to examine the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Australia.

The second, far more germane, body of literature seeks to understand individual religious conversion, with a large proportion of scholarly publications on the topic focusing on conversion to Islam in countries where Islam is a minority religion. These publications are often underpinned by quantitative or qualitative research that attempts to determine the personal reasons informing an individual's decision to convert through an examination of their life histories. Studies of this kind have spanned a number of countries, including but not limited to Britain (Köse 1996; Zebiri 2008), France (Lakhdar et al 2007), Nigeria (de Montclose 2008), the Netherlands (Van Nieuwkerk 2008), Côte d'Ivoire (Miran-Guyon 2012), Ghana (King 2010), the United States of America (Bowen 2015), Brazil (De Oliveira & Mariz 2006) and India (Eaton 1993). Such studies draw from several disciplines including theology, anthropology, sociology and psychology, and engage a wide range of theoretical paradigms developed by the sociology of contemporary religions, such as cross-cultural theory, post-colonial theory and psychoanalytical theory (Rambo 1999). While my own research is rooted in the sociology of race and the sociology of religion, this chapter follows the cross-disciplinary trend exhibited

in previous literature on religious conversion by drawing from psychology and anthropology as well.

Before looking more closely at the literature on conversion to Islam, it is first necessary to develop a common understanding of what religious conversion is and how it is formulated. This research project adopts Lewis Rambo's definition of conversion, beginning with the premise that "Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations" (1993 p. 5). Rambo expands on this definition to emphasise the 'process' element of conversion. He contends that conversion takes place over a period of time which varies from person to person, the process necessarily differs depending on the context in which conversion occurs, and that there are a number of factors that could impact a person's decision to convert. It is important to note that Rambo's approach is reflective of his disciplinary groundings in psychology, with an emphasis on the individual motivations and processes that lead to religious conversion. His work is distinct from that of sociologists of religious conversion such as Snow and Machalek (1984) and Marzouki and Roy (2013) who are less concerned about individual life events and trajectories and more concerned with the social and cultural aspects of converts' lives, and it is these sociological elements that are the focus of this thesis.

Nonetheless, Rambo's research has had a highly influential role in conversion studies. Indeed, much of the existing literature on conversion to Islam relies heavily on Rambo's substantial and multi-faceted work in the area of conversion, which he argues necessarily draws from several diverse disciplines precisely because conversion experiences are so varied and complex. This is no less evident in the literature on conversion to Islam. As previously mentioned, scholarship on conversion to Islam in the modern world is still emerging, and

while a number of studies have emerged from different disciplines and geographical locations, a solid, comprehensive body of scholarship has yet to be fully developed. Ali Köse's monograph published in 1996 remains one of the most comprehensive studies on the experiences of Muslim converts prior to their conversion, relying on participant observation and in-depth interviews with an impressive sample of 70 British converts to provide ethnographic analyses of their lives before and after conversion. Of this sample, Köse finds that:

> …their conversions are based on the cognitive or intellectual dynamics of their life. Their major motivation for adopting Islam is to give meaning to their life in the cosmos and to identify with a community that is less secularised and less willing to restrict religion to the level of individual consciousness. Thus, conversion has meant for them not only a shift from Christianity to Islam, but a shift from the secular to the sacred (1996, p. 310).

Amongst Köse's sample, then, conversion to Islam is predominantly characterised as an intellectual journey to a religion that is more collective in its experience and less secular in its practice than Christianity, with Christianity selected as a comparison here because 66 of his 70 participants were from various Christian churches. Rather than being singularly motivated, however, Köse suggests that "religious conversion does not emerge out of a single influence, but out of the mutual interaction of various forces that make a person sensitive to conversion" (1996, p. 123). Much of Köse's book focuses on the histories and religious backgrounds of the participants in order to further unpack their motivations. While a section of the book does look at their experiences after conversion, it is a much shorter and less detailed section, with the largest section of the book devoted to the conversion process itself. This may in part reflect the fact that ethnographic studies about conversion to Islam had only recently begun to emerge, and researchers of the time Köse was writing

were more concerned with converts' *reasons* for becoming Muslim than with their experiences *as* Muslims. Converts' motivations were of particular interest given that Islam held a minority position within the religious landscape of the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Köse takes a macro approach to conversion by emphasising the importance of historical migration patterns to the United Kingdom from Muslim majority countries and the corresponding increase in Islamic organisations, to the growth in conversion that he observed.

As a result of his focus on the wider social contexts in which conversion to Islam takes place, Köse pays less attention to the sociological characteristics of individual converts such as age and gender, a gap that has been addressed by later scholars (Sultán Sjöqvist 1999; Mansson McGinty 2006). Since the time of Köse's research, the literature has expressed a special interest in the motivations of women converting to Islam. Swedish sociologist of religion Madeleine Sultán Sjöqvist was one of the earliest scholars to research the experiences of female converts to Islam, prompting more research in later years. Her article "Choosing Islam" (1999) focuses on the motivations and experiences of Swedish female converts - in particular, their thoughts about family models within Islam. Sultán Sjöqvist identifies two key stages of the conversion process: attraction to particular lifestyles and modes of thinking, and later, 'reformulation,' or a reappraisal of the attitudes, values and beliefs that were idealised in the first phase. One of the key attractions to Islam as highlighted amongst her sample was the way that gender was constructed and performed, namely "the conception of an essential womanhood and manhood as well as of the patriarchal nuclear family" (1999 p. 325). These ideas, while instrumental in drawing the participants to the religion in the first place, are later contested and reformulated by the women as they move through the process of conversion.

Another scholar particularly concerned with the experiences of women is Anna Mansson McGinty, whose research is based on interviews with both Swedish and American women. In her book *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversion to Islam* (2006), Mansson McGinty stresses the concept of continuity – that rather than being a break from their previous lives, the women in her study expressed that their conversion was to them a necessary and even natural progression in the religious journeys. Her findings confirm previous scholarship on religious conversion, which is that importantly, conversion is "a 'turning from to' that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach" (Sakelleriou 2012, p. 64) – even where the religion that is converted into may be perceived by outsiders as being completely contrary to the individual's previous religious orientation. Mansson McGinty demonstrates this again in a later article in which she examines the life histories of two Swedish feminists who convert to Islam, and who use their faith as a space in which to resist patriarchal traditions and norms in a continuity of their feminist beliefs (2007, p. 478).

The preoccupation with the motivations of converts to Islam, particularly by non-Muslims and particularly with regards to women, is underlined by a sense of bewilderment in many of the aforementioned texts and the interest converts to Islam more generally, which I drew attention to in the introduction of this chapter. It is clear in the reading of these books and articles that for some, the choice to convert is seen as a strange one. Indeed, this can be said of any conversion. Writing about conversion to Islam in contemporary Greek society, Alexandros Sakellariou points out that religious conversion has long been of interest to social scientists:

> Conversion captures popular imagination and scholarly attention, because at the individual level we want to know how people change and changing one's religion is all the more perplexing, because religion is believed to be deeply rooted in family connections, cultural tradition, ingrained customs and ideologies (2012, p. 64).

This excerpt captures the core of why conversion to Islam is considered to be uniquely odd, particularly amongst women: the sense of bewilderment and confusion that underlies this response can be attributed to the idea that Islam is viewed as foreign and culturally distant from the dominant ideology of European and North American societies, particularly in regards to its perception and treatment of women. Accordingly, the scholarship reviewed so far can be perhaps viewed as a response to an overarching social desire within the West to understand why a person would convert to the religion of Islam. This idea will be examined in more detail later in this chapter, and indeed throughout this entire thesis.

As noted earlier, however, not all conversion to Islam in minority contexts occurs in the West. Writing of conversion to Islam in Nigeria, de Montclos (2008) suggests that the 'strangeness' of it could also be attributed to the hegemonic power of the clash of civilisations narrative which pits Islam against Christianity. Additionally, de Montclos notes that not only are Muslim converts considered an enigma, they are also viewed as a possible threat, stating that "the pattern [of conversion to Islam] worries strategists, as neophytes are usually feared to be more extremist than traditional Muslims" (2008, p. 72). De Montclos's analysis adds yet another framework through which to approach the fascination with Muslim converts, by suggesting that the interest in conversion to Islam in recent years is highly influenced by a state-led fear of terrorist attacks committed by Muslim converts, or those who are raised Muslim but develop a new zeal for the religion later on in life. This concept will be unpacked further in following chapters that focus more extensively on whiteness, and the role that the fear of a racialised Other plays in this perception of Muslim converts.

While the above studies are centred on motivations for conversion to Islam,

more recently the scholarship has gradually shifted its focus from the conversion process to the post-conversion period – specifically examining how converts experience and make meaning from their lives following their conversion. Studies that take this approach are often qualitative in nature, exploring the lived experiences of converts through in-depth interviews and focus groups. While predominantly concerned with motivations for conversion, Sultán Sjöqvist's research was one of the earliest studies to hint at this shift in focus in 1999. Since then, studies on converts' post-conversion experiences have become increasingly popular, particularly over the past decade. More often than not, the research centres on the lives of "native" converts in Western nations where Islam is a minority religion (Moosavi 2015, Sultán Sjöqvist 1999, Zebiri 2008). While there is still much to research within the field, the existing academic literature has already attended to a diverse range of aspects of converts' lives, such as loss of social status (Ibrahim 1995), feminist ideals (Mannson McGinty 2007) and the creation of self-image and identity (Mansson McGinty 2002).

An aspect of converts' post-conversion lives that is of considerable interest to this thesis is the relationship between the ethnic, national, and religious identities of converts. Tina Jensen's (2008) work with Danish converts highlights the tensions between a Danish national identity and Muslim religious identity and how converts negotiate the conflict. Jensen suggests that Muslims are the "ultimate other" within Danish society (2008, p. 389), which shapes the ways in which Danish Muslim converts construct and perform their Muslim identities and their religiosity. She further argues that the conflict that Danish converts are faced with also shapes their engagements with the broader non-Muslim Danish community – particularly family members and close friends - and the Muslim immigrant communities that they seek out. The converts'

uneasiness with their identity and place within Danish society "expresses a submission to and an integration of the polarisation between 'Danish' and 'Muslim' identity but also a questioning of this polarisation" (2008, p. 406). Jensen's research highlights the internal struggle for converts as they attempt to reconcile their national and religious identities within a political context in which the two are viewed by many as incompatible. Converts not only problematise the polarisation, their very existence creates new spaces for integration of both identities to occur.

Jensen's study is closely aligned with the research focus of this thesis, which seeks to determine how white Muslim converts experience race following their conversion, within an Australian context. While Jensen focuses on the ethnic and national identities of the Muslim converts, however, this thesis is concerned with the nexus of race and religion, a topic that she chooses to avoid. An area which is not investigated by Jensen is the experience of religious discrimination or racism by converts. Indeed, this is a lack in the literature on converts more generally, with some exceptions (see Moosavi 2015, discussed in section 2.3).

While not specific to converts, Myfanwy Franks' article "Crossing the Borders of Whiteness? White Muslim women who wear the *ḥijāb* in Britain today" centres on the experiences of white British *ḥijābis,* many of whom *are* converts. Franks posits that the experiences of white *ḥijābis* in Britain, particularly in reference to the reactions of people around them to the previously "invisible" women becoming "conspicuous", demonstrates the shifting nature of race and racism, and that white Muslims provide a "test" case for further exploration of the intersection of racism and religious discrimination (Franks 2000, p. 926). Her participants refer to being on the receiving end of racist abuse from white non-Muslims - "'white Paki being the cleanest so far'" (Franks 2000, p. 922) –

while British non-white Muslims struggle to come to terms with the idea of a white Muslim. Franks attributes these reactions to British society's association of whiteness with Christianity, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Given that her research consists of only 5 survey questionnaires and 6 semi-structured interviews with white Muslim women, the data Franks relies on is relatively thin, and she refrains from making a definitive statement about whether or not she believes that white Muslim women who wear the *ḥijāb* are indeed seen to cross the boundaries of whiteness. She states, however, that it is clear that racism can shift and change over time and location, and she urges that there be more research done on the intersection between religious and racial discrimination, a call taken up by this thesis.

As demonstrated in this section thus far, much of the research on Muslim converts has taken place in Europe. In Australia, academic studies specifically focusing on the experiences of Muslim converts are still a relatively new phenomenon. Very little has been written about Australian Muslim converts, with Peta Stephenson's book *Islam Dreaming* (2010) being one of the few substantive texts to include the stories of contemporary Australian Muslim converts, in this case Indigenous converts. Islam Dreaming is not solely about Indigenous converts, but rather about Indigenous encounters with Islam, including the experiences of non-Muslim Aboriginal women married to Muslim men and Aboriginal Muslims who were raised Muslim from birth. Stephenson's chapter on Aboriginal converts is similar to many of the aforementioned texts in that much of the focus of the chapter is on motivations for conversion, some of which are informed by a desire for a faith in which they can see themselves (as opposed to a white-centric Christianity) and which they feel gives them space to continue to practice their culture and connection to country (2010, p. 190-194). While Stephenson does touch on her participants'

post-conversion lives, it is a peripheral point of interest in the chapter itself.

One other academic text about Muslim converts to emerge from Australia besides my own article is that of Rachel Woodlock's, who writes about convert women and the barriers they face when trying to access their local mosques. "Praying Where They Don't Belong" (Woodlock 2010) analyses the engagements of female convert women from Melbourne with the (at least theoretically) communal space provided by mosques, arguing that gender discrimination and cultural prejudice limits convert women's access to mosques which are seen to belong to one ethnic group only, into which category most mosques in Melbourne – and indeed, Australia – fall. Woodlock boldly asserts that because most mosques are dominated by a singular immigrant ethnic group who claim ownership over the mosque (typically because it was built through funds collected from that immigrant ethnic community) means that "there is no place for the culture of the Australian convert to operate" (2010, p. 276). The Australian converts she refers to are Australian Muslims from ethnic backgrounds that have historically not been represented within Muslim communities in Australia, predominantly those of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic heritage. Woodlock suggests that it is precisely because of their small numbers that they feel compelled to adopt another ethnic group's cultural values or practices. Her interviews indicate that white female converts may find it difficult to find a public place of worship that is not dominated by one particular ethnicity and that they feel they can actively participate in. However, her pessimistic conclusion that there is no place for an 'Australian' Islam whatsoever is perhaps too definitive a statement to make based on her research, particularly as she goes on to concede Jensen's argument that there is the potential for converts to "'Indigenise' Islam as much as their identity is 'Islamised'" (2010, p. 277). Woodlock is largely pessimistic about opportunities

for female Australian converts to participate in the Muslim community without first accessing the mosque.

As demonstrated in this literature review, academic research globally is limited in scope and to some extent volume, although this set of circumstances has been changing rapidly over the last decade. Much of the research that does exist focuses on the motivations or pre-conversion life biographies of converts. Less is known about their lives following their conversion with regards to their experiences and interactions within the Muslim and broader community, particularly as relates to how they negotiate their racial identity, experiences of racism and discrimination, and feelings of belonging and identity - gaps that need to be addressed in order to provide a more rounded understanding of the Muslim experience in Australia. This thesis seeks to offer a nuanced, complex and largely optimistic picture of how white converts negotiate and integrate their racial and religious identity. The following sections of this chapter examine how participants describe their pre-conversion lives and introduction to Islam, to provide a context through which to understand their post-conversion experiences.

4.3 Religious Background of Participants Prior to Conversion

Participants in this study fell into three categories of religious orientation prior to converting to Islam, which can loosely be characterised as religious and/or practising Christians, nominal Christians, and agnostics and atheists. The majority of participants explained that they were Christian before conversion; of the nineteen who cited Christianity, nine were Roman Catholic, with a smaller number identifying as Seventh Day Adventist, Anglican, Pentecostal or stating broadly that they had been born again, evangelical or charismatic Christians. Of these nineteen, only a handful

described themselves as being somewhat or very religious and invested in their faith up until a few months or years of converting to Islam, both in terms of practice and doctrinal knowledge and understanding. Most described themselves as nominally or culturally Christian. Some participants alternated between referring to themselves as having previously been Christian, and at other times as agnostic or secular in terms of actual belief. It was also common for participants to state that they had been Christian, but that religion meant nothing to them and did not have a practical impact on their lives. In total, four participants explicitly identified themselves as having been agnostic prior to conversion. Only three of the people I interviewed characterised themselves as being atheist before becoming Muslim. No other faith groups were represented in this study.

For some of the participants who stated that they had been religious prior to becoming Muslim, their commitment to the Christian faith had developed over their lifetime, having received religious education and training from their parents or their schooling, and occasionally both. Xander explains that with a minister for a father, religion was an integral and omnipresent part of his childhood:

> I didn't know how to be anything but a Catholic. I was baptised, confirmed; always went to Church, received Communion often. Did Lent – Lent was always hard for me growing up… It always seemed a bit unfair that all my Catholic school friends had it so much easier than me, but I never questioned it. I was 100% committed to Jesus and I am still committed to him, I just don't think he's the son of God anymore.

Xander explains that he had always believed in Jesus and God, even when he was an "irrepressibly curious" adolescent. Unlike many of his peers, his religious education both at home and at school had simply heightened his interest in Christianity. He acknowledges that his case is contrary to the

experiences of many other people who had had a similar religious upbringing, and adds that his high school friends teased him for being "brainwashed." Xander disagrees with this assessment, opining that the more educated and invested he became in the Catholic doctrine, the more critical and intellectually engaged he became. His questioning mind eventually leading him to reject the concept of the Trinity and ultimately convert to Islam, a narrative that was not uncommon amongst the people interviewed in this study. Xander's conversion to Islam symbolised for him a continuity of his religious journey, rather than a break.

Unlike Xander who had grown up with the Christian religion since he was a young child, Liam found Christianity on his own, as a homeless teenager "searching for meaning". Liam described his childhood as being largely non-religious, having a "baby boomer mother" who, like many in her generation, "just threw off the shackles of religion." He adds however that she did have her own "quiet faith" despite her disillusionment with the church. Liam left school at a young age and ran away from home, and it was after he had spent some time as a "street kid," as he expresses it, that Liam turned to Christianity. Religion became the means through which he sought a space where he felt he belonged and could gain a sense of community. Liam describes himself as a born again Christian from the ages of 14 to 20, and states that in those six years he was "quite evangelical":

> I was full of missionary zeal. I felt that I was blessed, that I'd had a blessed change in my life from being a street kid. I really felt like God had done something wonderful in my life and put me on the straight path. And I felt I wanted to share with others. And I had this zeal for the truth.

Liam's quest to find the truth is what brought him to eventually study Islam. For Xander, the process had occurred slowly as he questioned more and more

of the Catholic doctrines that he had been taught. In Liam's case, he came across Islam as he sought to confirm his own beliefs in his evangelical Christian faith. Liam stated that he originally studied Islam and a range of other religions in an attempt to find some common ground with which to debate other people interested in theology. He acknowledges that his intentions were not merely of an impartial observer, and that "[he] wanted to learn it so - in a way to undermine it." Liam's eventual conversion to Islam was a result of him educating himself thoroughly about Islamic theology in order to debate Muslims, which led to an internal conflict about his own religious beliefs.

A third participant who described being a religious Christian prior to her conversion to Islam was Cassie. Cassie's interest in religion came much later in life, but it also began with an interest in Christianity, which her family had practised nominally throughout her life. She recollects:

> I did kind of become a little bit more religious before converting, before even kind of getting to that point where I think I was just trying to get more religious and did my Confirmation into the church when I was like 21. Which was really random, but I guess not random. Cos that's usually something you do as a kid and I just hadn't done it.

Cassie frames her time within the Catholic faith as a stepping stone rather than a formative stage. Speaking about her experiences as a Christian, she explains: "It was just kind of a step towards becoming more religious and thinking about it more seriously." Despite her characterisation of this period of her life as a "step," she describes a wholehearted participation in Catholic practices such as taking communion, attending Church regularly, being confirmed, proselytising to others, practising Lent, and viewing holidays such as Easter and Christmas as religious rather than purely cultural holiday. For Cassie, "becoming more religious" meant participating in the rituals and practices of her Catholic faith, a step that she felt was vital to preparing her for the ritualistic elements of Islamic

practice later on in life.

Despite the differences in their religious backgrounds, Xander, Liam and Cassie share a commonality in their conversion narratives - all of them represent their conversion to Islam as being a continuity of their spiritual journey, rather than a break or a crisis of faith. None of the three participants describe their conversion to Islam as exceptional. Instead, they report it simply as the progression of their robust interest in religion more generally. The experience of Xander, Liam and Cassie reflects a trend amongst participants who considered themselves to already be religious before their conversion to Islam – none of them stated that they had felt surprised when they came to start believing in the Islamic God or the teachings of Islam, as they believed it to be a natural course of events in their religious lives.

Among this group of already religious participants, there was no identifiable personal, social or religious "crisis" that triggered their conversion. This appears to be contrary to Rambo's integrative model of religious conversion, which outlines the seven stages of religious conversion as context, *crisis*, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. Rambo's seven stage model has been adopted by scholars working in the field of religious conversion studies, but has also drawn criticism from those who suggest that his matrix is more applicable to Christianity than other religions, and does not differentiate between conversions that take place in a minority-faith context versus conversions to a religion which is the dominant one of that area (Roald 2004). Writing about Scandinavian converts to Islam, theologian and sociologist of religion Anne Roald suggests that while some of Rambo's stages "might be suitable for analytic purposes… Rambo's in-depth description of these stages is perhaps more suitable to the Christian than the Islamic context" (2004, p. 79). Roald goes on to argue that this is because many of the contemporary studies

on conversion to Islam takes place in contexts where Islam is a minority religion, and thus the social aspect of conversion is more significant than the psychological or religious elements (2004, p. 79).

It is the crisis stage of Rambo's model that draws the most criticism from Roald, who contends that the "crisis" stage of Rambo's model as a triggering element in the pre-conversion period does not fit the empirical data she herself has collected on Muslim converts (2004, p. 94). She convincingly argues that the reason for this is because Muslim converts in contexts where Muslims are the minority experience this crisis *after* conversion; in other words, Muslim converts experience crisis as a *consequence* of conversion rather than a *trigger* for conversion (2004, p. 95). A pre-conversion crisis is more suitable to describing a stage in conversion to Christianity than to Islam in the West, she claims, because of the dominance of Christianity in Western society. Roald explains:

> As a crisis occurs, it is more feasible for a person to look for a solution within the established frame of references which means either an intensifying of one's religion or a change in denomination within the same religion, than it would be to turn to a religion which would cause more problems for the person in terms of the Islamophobic expressions in Western society (2004, p. 95).

In other words, Roald posits that Islam's status as a minority religion in the West makes it unlikely that people would convert to Islam as a result of a personal or social crisis in their life, but makes it very probable that they may face a personal or social crisis as a result of their conversion, a subject that will be examined in later chapters.

Cassie, Liam and Xander were not the only participants to express that they were practising Christians prior to their conversion to Islam, however, participants who claimed to take a nominal approach to the Christian faith were far more common. Many participants described their upbringing as Christian,

or stated that they had had varying levels of religious education, but qualified their statements by explaining that their attachment to Christianity had been one of cultural or familial tradition rather than religious belief. Ben was one such participant. When asked about the religious environment in his household growing up in Scotland in the 1990s, Ben explained that his family was not "religiously literate" despite partaking in Christian activities:

> I'd say generically Christian but non-practising. I think I was baptised, I honestly can't remember. And it wasn't a big deal at all in my family. We celebrated Christmas as a family tradition rather than a religious one, and weddings and funerals of course but that was about it. It was really non-religious – I mean we say Christian in the loosest meaning of that term, because my family were not religiously literate really… it wasn't a very serious thing.

It is clear from his description of his childhood that Ben's attitude to religion growing up was one of apathy and disinterest, and that Christian practices in his family were viewed as a matter of culture and community rather than as belief. The influence of this on his decision to convert becomes apparent later on, as he states that he developed a fascination with 'Eastern' religions as a teenager – but as intellectual traditions that related to his interests of martial arts and history, rather than as faith orientations.

Ben's characterisation of the role of religion in his life was shared by many participants. Salwa's memories of religion growing up centred more on community than belief or strict practice. When asked if her upbringing as a child in 1950s Australia was religious, Salwa laughed out loud:

> Goodness no. Religion was not mentioned. Actually, my father's uncle was an Anglican minister. We didn't see a lot of him. So there wasn't ever any discussion of religion or politics, you know all the things that it was sort of polite not to mention in company. And two of my brothers are atheists. My mother used to go to a Presbyterian church. My father used to say she really went there to socialise because she met her friends and they had scones and tea after service. And yeah, that was it.

Participants like Salwa and Ben formed the largest cohort within the sample group. For them, religion was only significant insofar as it had a cultural influence on their lives. Very few of the participants who identified as previously nominal Christians reflected on their belief at that stage in their lives, with most of them stating that although they knew they were Christian, they rarely talked about religion and were even less likely to participate in Christian rituals. If they did, it was purely for the social and cultural functions that the rituals played, as indicated by Salwa, rather than because they felt the practices had any sacred value. Out of those who did discuss the belief or 'faith' aspect of their religion, they tended to describe either being agnostic or drifting in and out of belief and disbelief. Overwhelmingly, however, participants who were nominally Christian prior to their conversion to Islam expressed a feeling of apathy about religion.

The final, and smallest, group amongst the participant sample were those who explicitly identified as agnostic or atheist. One participant, Fatima, stated that she had been agnostic for most of her life; although her mother was Seventh Day Adventist and her father was raised Anglican, "religion didn't really play a very big role in [her] life growing up." Only two people interviewed expressed having a strong atheist identity – Ahmed and Edward. Interestingly, both also characterised themselves as being politically active anarchists at the time. Ahmed and Edward were quick to clarify that their atheism had been different to the "new atheism" espoused by people such as Richard Dawkins, which they viewed as being distinctly anti-Islam. Ahmed opined that when he was a young atheist in the 1990s, atheism was predominantly antagonistic towards Christianity:

> Unlike the atheism of today the contempt was mainly directed at Christianity, because of its connection to imperialism and power and the oppression of the poor. And other religions were dismissed as an atheist, but they weren't subjected to the same kinds of contemptuous scrutiny. They were more just cultural oddities rather than political enemies.

In the above excerpt, Ahmed explains the connection between his religious and political identity at the time, and why he felt that his interest in Islam did not conflict with his anarchist and atheist ideals. Ahmed goes on to state that his atheism had never specifically sought out Islam as a target, in line with the dominant atheist thought of the time. Ahmed's characterisation of the form that atheism took at the time of the 1990s supports the argument of Australian historian of religion William Emilsen, who contends that the emergence of the anti-theist, anti-religious movement known as New Atheism - associated with critics like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens - has only emerged in the beginning of twenty-first century (2012, p. 521). By this stage, Ahmed had converted to Islam and no longer identified as an atheist. Emilsen (2012) documents why he believes that the New Atheism espoused by the above authors is distinctly anti-Islam, citing not only their works but also the arguments of their ex-Muslim proponents such as Ibn Warraq and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. While he shies away from labelling their work as Islamophobic, he argues that "it is clear that the new atheists' strategy of attacking all religions, or expressions of religion, as a cover for criticising not only militant Islam but Islam itself has contributed to anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments throughout the Western world" (2012 p. 528). This is in stark contrast to the form that the "old" atheism took, which was distinctly and primarily anti-Christian in its outlook, as noted by Ahmed.

There is surprisingly little in the literature about Muslims who convert from atheism. This is perhaps reflective of the small number of people who fit this

category; the academic texts examined in the first section of this chapter identify that it is far more common for converts from Western countries to come from Christian backgrounds than atheist or agnostic ones. This is a logical finding given that in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, as examples of Western countries, Christianity continues to be the dominant religion, with far fewer people subscribing to no religion (Pew Research Centre 2012). Although there is a trend towards the decline of Christianity and the rise of atheism and agnosticism, the continued dominance of Christianity in countries like Australia can explain the numerical discrepancy between those who convert to Islam from Christianity and those who convert from an atheist or agnostic belief system. Another potential explanation can also be found in the argument offered by one participant that converting from atheism meant they had 'greater distance' to cover, so to speak – having an existing belief in a monotheistic God meant that one of the greatest hurdles was already crossed. Other commonalities between Islam and Christianity also assisted in this transition. Participants named angels, the afterlife, and sharing prophets such as Jesus, Moses and Noah as elements of Islam that they were already familiar with and believed in as a result of their Christian upbringing. Additionally, for some participants, their previous Christian faith directly fed into their eventual conversion to Islam, which is demonstrated in the final section of this chapter.

This section has identified that the majority of participants in this study came from either a practising or nominal Christian background, with a very small number of participants identifying as agnostic or atheist prior to their conversion. The following section examines the level of knowledge about Islam and contact with Muslims that participants had before they became Muslim, to provide more background to their post-conversion stories, explored in later chapters.

4.4 Contact with Muslims

The nature of participants' encounters with Muslims prior to their conversion varied significantly, with some commonalities in narrative based upon the time of their conversion and where they resided in Sydney. Salwa describes growing up in the Blue Mountains 1950s as living in "the Dark Ages": "There were no Asians. There were a few Greeks and Italians who were regarded with great suspicion. But it was very much a white, Anglo Protestant kind of environment." Salwa's initial contact with Muslims came after marrying her Muslim husband in 1962, after which time she started interacting with Muslims in Sydney from time to time. She notes that in the early stages, Muslims were still few and far between: "When I first got married there were about 6 Muslims in Sydney. Eid prayers, we would all go to the Pakistani consulate and there would be one row of guys and that was it. And it was very, very small – this was still in the days of the White Australia policy." Salwa's contact with Muslims was limited both due to the size of the Muslim community and her distance from them.

While Salwa's contact with the Sydney Muslim community was largely a product of the era in which she converted, Katherine's lack of exposure to Muslims was entirely due to her location. Katherine converted to Islam in 2012, when the Muslim population of Sydney was 208 000 or almost 5% of Sydney (ABS 2011). However, she states that after moving to the Northern Beaches from Manchester in the United Kingdom she had almost zero contact with Muslims in Australia until she started university. She states, "In terms of Muslims, there were no Muslims. I knew one Arab guy at all on the Northern Beaches 'til I was about 18." She concedes however that the school environment was such that it is possible there were more but they just didn't feel comfortable admitting it to

anyone, which could well be likely given that the 2011 Census data indicates that 0.47% of the close to 238 000 residents of the Northern Beaches in NSW, or 1126 residents, identified themselves as Muslim on the Census form (ABS 2011). While this figure is less than a quarter of the national average in 2011 which found that 2.2% of Australians subscribe to Islam, it is still far from a complete absence of Muslims in the region.

Regardless of where they lived, most participants – Katherine included – stated that they came into more contact with Muslims or became more conscious of their contact with Muslims in their late teens and 20s. Amongst those who were tertiary educated, university was often cited as a space where participants were more exposed to Muslims and also had an opportunity to engage with them more. Cassie offers an explanation for this phenomenon based on her own experiences:

> I had friends who were Muslim in like a mixed kind of religious and ethnic background social kind of situation… So I think that was really positive cos we were all really accepting of each other and didn't really kind of – go into criticising each other's religions or anything. So it was a safe environment to get exposed. It was good. And I guess university more generally is I dunno, generally a little bit more accepting and open-minded and flexible and you're open to interacting with different types of people. I think that was kind of a good environment to be in early on.

Cassie's recollections of her time as an undergraduate at university include long discussions about religion and theology with her new friends and classmates, which she claims was pertinent to the development of her interest in religion; firstly Catholicism, and later Islam. Having lived in northern New South Wales for the majority of her life, Cassie had had little contact with Muslims before befriending some at university, and it is likely that without this contact her conversion to Islam may have come at a much later date, if at all. Cassie's

sentiments about the impact of her exposure to Muslims and Islam at University are echoed by Edward, who had regular but limited contact with Muslims through his job at the postgraduate association at his university:

> I say this to people all the time, university is probably one of the most life-changing experiences you'll ever have because you come into contact with people from such different walks of life. Ethnic backgrounds, religions and it really is a mind-opening experience.

Edward's first "proper" conversation with a Muslim was at a barbecue that the postgraduate association organised in conjunction with the Muslim Students Association at the university. Edward states that at the barbecue he met a student who was "just very nice," something Edward stressed multiple times during the interview: "I really respected him as a person. He was just a lovely guy, and lovely people are quite rare in our society so it's not something that you find very often. He really had an impact on me, and to this day, whilst I met a lot of other really nice Muslims, he's probably one of the nicer Muslims I've ever met."

As evidenced by Cassie's and Edward's stories, for some participants their contact with Muslims was a positive experience that provided something of a catalyst for their eventual conversion. At the very least, their exposure to Muslims was not a deterrent to them learning about Islam, even if the level of contact itself did not encourage them to discover more about Islam. Romantic relationships were also a catalyst for some participants, which is explored in depth in the following section that outlines reasons for conversion that emerged in the interview data. These participants viewed their interactions with Muslims as positive prior to their conversions, and they also described their view of Muslims as being neutral or generally positive.

Conversely, a small number of participants described having explicitly Islamophobic views, which they attributed to negative interactions with Muslims. Ali describes himself as being "very racist" when he was younger, and that he "grew up believing that white people were superior to everyone else and everyone else was just trying to catch up." Ali states that he did not have much interaction with Muslims or know anything about Islam at the time of his conversion in the 1990s, but if he had not converted he would now be "one of those people out protesting Islamic schools, *ḥalāl*, all of that stuff. I'm ashamed to say it but I would be." He notes that although he had always had racist views towards a range of minority groups, it was while he was working at a service station as a teenager that his Islamophobia peaked. Ali states that his workplace was at the end of a street populated by Muslims, many of whom would visit the service station and in Ali's words, "were generally louts… would harass women." Ali attributed their attitude to their faith, and it was through his interactions with them that he started to develop Islamophobic attitudes.

Despite his embarrassment about his attitudes as a young man, Ali reflects that it was ultimately his racism against Muslims that led him to Islam. In his interview, he says that whenever the young Muslim men entered the service station, they would try and start arguments with him about religion, which Ali felt ill-equipped to partake in. After one such occasion, Ali decided to learn about Islam to equip himself to combat their arguments, and bought a second-hand copy of the Qur'an to accompany his online research. It was through this reading and search for fallacies within the Qur'an that he unexpectedly became attracted to the religion:

> I started reading with a highlighter pen, because in the Bible they're easy to find. I thought it would be even easier to find in this book, so I'll highlight them and keep it in the shop. So next time they start to talk religion, I'll bring

it out and we'll talk religion. My intentions weren't good. They were to be a troll, to be an Islamophobe, essentially. But in looking for mistakes, I found that there weren't any that I could see.

Like Liam in an earlier section, Ali initially sought to teach himself about Islam in order to debate with Muslims about their faith and to undermine their arguments, but ultimately found himself attracted to Islam because he felt that it was "more true" than his current belief system.

Bridget was another participant who expressed that she had Islamophobic views prior to conversion. Like Ali, much of her ire towards Muslims stemmed from how she perceived Muslim men treat women. Bridget says that her first interactions with Muslims occurred when she was 18 and worked in the city, and that her experiences with the Lebanese men she met through her work were "not good." She explains that her interactions with Muslim men through her work occurred around the time of the 2001 gang rapes in and around Bankstown, and that "being an Aussie girl, hearing on the news that these guys were doing these things to women just based on their nationality, it was disturbing to me. I also had a girlfriend who was sexually abused by four Lebanese guys, and it was pretty horrific what they did to her." Bridget notes that she thought that Muslim was interchangeable with Lebanese and Arab at the time, and that by the time the September 11 terrorist attacks occurred she was very anti-Muslim. Speaking about herself in her late teens, Bridget recollects:

> You know, I was a bit of a racist. I hated Muslim people at that stage in my life. I remember once getting on a train and seeing a Muslim guy all dressed in white and really telling him to get the hell out of my country and we don't want you here, and if you hate Australian people then why are you here for. Just ranting the most stupidest stuff you know. And when I look back at that time… actually after I started yelling at him, māshāʾAllāh he just sat there and looked at me. He looked like he was sad, he was sad for me. He didn't retaliate, he didn't say anything. And I ended up feeling like an idiot. I felt like an idiot

cos I was yelling at him, and everyone was just looking at me, and he didn't retaliate so what the hell was the point of that? So I just got up out of that train carriage and went and sat in another one feeling stupid.

Although her initial attitude towards Muslims was largely negative, things changed for Bridget when she met her Lebanese boyfriend, later husband, and his family. She suggests that it was her exposure to practising Muslims, particularly around holy periods such as Ramadan when her now-husband would take her to spend time with his family and she was immersed in the religious atmosphere in their home. She also emphasises the hospitality and generosity which she experienced in their home, which she attributes to their faith.

A significant number of participants stated that their conversion had come about despite a lack of contact with Muslims. Of these, many expressed relief about this fact, paraphrasing renowned convert Yusuf Islam (formerly musician Cat Stevens) by stating, "I'm glad I found Islam before I found Muslims." Through this sentiment, participants suggested that unlike those who felt that the character of the Muslims they had met inspired them to research the religion further, such as Edward and Bridget, their experience with Muslims post-conversion were so negative that they would have been "turned off" the religion had they encountered those Muslims prior to conversion. This refrain was a common one, encapsulated in this quote from Jason:

> I think in the beginning, I was enamoured by it all. I threw myself into Islam, I went to all the classes I could, went to the mosque when I could, read everything. Everything. Even all the wacky stuff. I was enamoured by my teachers and the people I would see at the mosque. Of course, through all of this I eventually started to get exposed to the wider Muslim community, and the shine wore off very quickly… I'm glad I got a chance to really learn about the true spirit of Islam before I met Muslims, because if I'd met them first I probably would never have converted. And I know more than a few people who left Islam precisely because of the Muslims that they met.

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Details of participants' post-conversion interactions with Muslims are discussed in depth in Chapter Six, but it is useful to note here that the experiences discussed involved pressure to conform to particular practices posited as Islamic, harassment in public spaces such as the mosque and exposure to extremist views or views that participants found particularly confronting. Incidents such as these were cited by participants as having seriously challenged their faith, and like Jason, many of them suggested that if they had not already developed a strong belief in the religion, such events would have been enough to force them away from Islam for good.

4.5 Reasons for Conversion

As demonstrated in the review of the literature at the beginning of this chapter, there is a substantial body of research on the reasons why people convert to Islam, reflecting the amount of interest that the question of religious conversion elicits. Given the comprehensive nature of the literature, this section does not introduce any novel reasons for conversion; it does, however, provide a context for participants' post-conversion experiences, and explain some of the specific circumstances surrounding their conversion processes.

Although participants were not asked specifically about their reasons for conversion, most participants revealed their reasons throughout the telling of their experiences leading up to and after their conversion. The reasons given were varied and diverse. For some, it was for practical reasons; they wanted to get married to their Muslim partner, and had to convert to Islam to do so. For many participants, their conversion came after a period of searching; for many more still, it was an unexpected turn of events and as surprising to themselves as it was to people who knew them. This section details some of the more

common conversion narratives offered by participants throughout the course of their in-depth interviews.

4.5.1 Relationships with Muslims

As noted previously, marriage is a commonly cited reason for conversion to Islam. In the orthodox Islamic tradition, Muslim women are only allowed to marry Muslim men; marriage to a non-Muslim man is considered invalid. Muslim men are permitted to marry Muslim women and other women 'of the Book' if they are 'chaste'; namely, Christian and Jewish women who strictly adhere to their scriptures. It is thus unsurprising that a number of converts to Islam in Australia became Muslim solely for the purposes of marrying their Muslim partners, but are otherwise non-religious. This is particularly understandable given that the act of conversion to Islam is a relatively easy and straightforward task. There are no compulsory courses to be taken or lengthy rituals to be performed - a simple recitation of the testament of faith, or *Shahādah*, in front of a witness is sufficient (Al-Misri & Keller 1997). Only two participants in this study fall into this category, but it should be stressed that of the participants who did initially convert to Islam for the purposes of marriage, all of them did ultimately adopt the religion more fully, and believe in it as a faith. This is an unsurprising outcome given the recruitment process, as those who did not identify with Islam as a faith position are unlikely to have volunteered to be a part of the research project. This is further reflected in the very small number of participants who explicitly stated that they converted purely for the purposes of marriage. Thus, the cases examined here encompass a range of conversion narratives related to romantic relationships with Muslims that do at times overlap with other motivations for conversion, depending on when their interest in Islam developed.

James's story is perhaps one of the more straightforward stories of the group. As a teenager attending a multicultural high school, several of his friends were Muslim and he dated a Muslim girl for over a year at the age of 15. James states that despite the contact he had with Muslims, he had never been interested in Islam himself. To him, his Muslim friends' religion was only important to him insofar as how it impacted him and his relationships with them. Speaking of his Muslim girlfriend, he states that while she was not particularly religiously practising herself, her parents' prohibitions on her dating and on her movements in the evenings meant that it was one of his most challenging relationships during that period. James reminisces:

> In retrospect, her parents weren't awfully strict or repressive at all, but as a teenage boy who just wanted to spend time with his girlfriend, it felt that way. And I blamed it entirely on her religion. Also her culture – she was Pakistani – but to me at the time I guess they were interchangeable. So I didn't actually know anything much about Islam at the time, cos my girlfriend never talked about it, but I did know that I didn't like it because it stopped me from doing normal things with her like go to parties... It seemed very restrictive, particularly to girls.

James admits with some obvious embarrassment that when he started dating his now wife almost 10 years later at the age of 25, he knew almost as little about Islam as he had in high school, and did not feel a need to learn. He says, "I met Asma at a night club. I knew she was Muslim, but she was like a lot of the other Muslims I knew – she drank, she was into partying." They got married after dating for two and a half years, and he converted directly before the *nikāḥ*, or marriage contract. He reflects that for him it was purely a formality; neither he nor his wife had any interest in Islam and he had no intention of ever becoming a practising Muslim. His family and some close friends knew he had converted, but like him, they also saw it as a nominal performance rather than a real testament of faith. When asked what the turning

point for him was, he states that it was a gradual process which came about through his wife's family.

> Asma wasn't practising, but her family was, and so we'd go to their house for Eid or during Ramadan and they'd invite me to pray with them, and at first, I dunno, I just went along because they were my in-laws and I wanted a good relationship with them, as you do. But pretty soon I found it gave me something beyond that... it's not easy to describe, but it felt... praying just felt right? And when I started fasting occasionally, that felt right. And that's when I thought, maybe I should learn a bit about this religion that I am apparently a part of. It was very slow though. I'd say I became a Muslim about three years after my conversion.

Unlike James, who started to learn about Islam after marriage, Penny became interested in Islam during the course of her relationship with her now husband, Tariq. Tariq was the first Muslim that Penny had met, and was non-practising at the time. Penny adds that she was also non-practising, and while she believed in God, she did not subscribe to any religion and "considered herself to be something different." Penny describes her interest in Islam as a gradual one that was self-initiated, since Tariq was not invested in the religion himself and only became interested in practising after she did. She states:

> So I met him and he wasn't practising, and he told me he was a Muslim, right up, from the front. But it didn't really – I just thought oh yeah, that's nice. It didn't really click with me. But I started slowly researching myself, and the more and more I read the more I thought, oh, well, this is a really good religion and it wasn't until we decided to get married that I started looking into it even more. So it was sort of on and off for the few years that we were seeing each other. Reading into it slowly, getting a feel for it, and then I reverted just before we got married... About two months after we got married, I really started practising. And he ended up coming back as well, and we started practising together.

Penny's narrative differs to that of James because she began to believe in Islam during the process of learning about the religion while she and Tariq dated. Her genuine interest in the religion inspired her non-practising husband to embrace Islam more fully as well. Given this context, Penny did not frame her

conversion as one that was done 'for marriage,' but instead represents that she was introduced to Islam through her then boyfriend. This was common amongst the participants, although not all of them ended up marrying the person they were introduced to Islam through. For example, Belinda recounts how her Turkish boyfriend promised to teach her about Islam, but never did; and so she started learning about it through books, the Internet, and eventually Islamic classes. Her relationship with him ended after a year, but she still felt strongly enough about Islam to convert. Belinda narrates:

> I asked him a lot of questions about it but he didn't know the answers. So I was scared to look on the internet or go to books. Cos you don't know – there's so much terrorism out there and you don't know what's trustworthy. So yeah for years he was like "I'll teach you everything you need to know" but he didn't, so eventually I did end up going to a class at Auburn mosque. And I did that because I lived close to the area and it was the biggest mosque so I thought it would be the most trustworthy.

Salwa's journey to conversion differed again, as her conversion took place decades after her 1962 marriage to Yahya, a Chinese Muslim man she met at university. She explains that the question of conversion never really arose, because neither she nor her husband were very concerned about religion:

> …He wasn't a very well-educated Muslim. There were lots of things he didn't know because he'd grown up in Hong Kong during the Second World War during the Japanese occupation. And there were no madrasas and his father was in a prisoner of war camp. The Japanese imprisoned Chinese men. So he didn't actually know very much. He knew he was a Muslim, he knew he should do *salat*, and he knew quite a few things but he certainly wasn't educated Islamically. So we got married and I didn't convert and he wasn't particularly worried about it. His father was.

Salwa ended up converting to Islam close to 28 years after her marriage to Yahya. When asked why she decided to convert to Islam after so long, she answered that there had been a family crisis and she did not feel that her husband could cope on his own, and she felt that she could support him better by "join[ing] the gang." She adds, "I didn't really expect it to do me any good at

all and I was quite surprised when it did have some benefits." Salwa's decision to convert in her late 40s was to better support her husband emotionally, after almost 28 years of marriage.

While marrying or dating a Muslim was a common entry point to conversion, some participants expressed that other Muslims were more likely to question your commitment to the faith if they found out that you came to Islam through another person. Paul met his now-wife when he was in high school, and converted some years later after developing a belief in the religion. When Paul was asked what he thinks Muslims want to hear when they ask him why he converted, he replied:

> Probably not the answer I give. I'm comfortable with telling people that basically I was dating a Muslim. And I only say that because so much of that happens but people don't acknowledge that. I feel like I'm doing that – although it's a bit uncomfortable to actually say that now as a Muslim and I want to protect my wife's name or whatever, but at the same time I want to look out for all the huge amounts of Muslims in their teens or early 20s who are trying to get married but there's nothing supporting them.

It is clear throughout Paul's interview that he feels able to tell the truth about his entry point into Islam because he feels that he has now 'proven' himself as a Muslim, over a decade on, particularly given his professional commitment to the global Muslim community through his work. Despite his credentials as a fixture in the Muslim community, Paul indicates that people are still surprised and somewhat disappointed that his conversion story is relatively commonplace.

Female participants were more likely to encounter the assumption that they had converted solely for marriage amongst non-Muslim family and friends than their male counterparts, particularly if they chose to wear *ḥijāb*. This attitude frustrated some of the participants who felt that the assumption was based on

the idea that the women were weak, submissive, and had little agency in deciding both their faith and what they wore. Penny stated:

> A lot of people just think I converted because I married a Muslim, which annoys me sometimes because that's just so not the case and I don't want to make that representation of Islam, that just because you marry a Muslim man that you have to be a Muslim. Because it was completely my choice and so I try and explain that but some people don't want to listen, they just take it as you just converted because of your husband.

Similarly, Cassie expressed disgust at people who found it easier to understand her conversion as the outcome of her relationship than of an independent decision she made:

> And they find it a lot easier to, like, for me conversion wise they were like 'Ohhh, you're married to a Muslim, got it'. It's so much easier and it really disgusts me, it's so much easier for them to accept that you've chosen a religion, you've chosen a whole way of life, belief system, everything, to fit into your relationship rather than vice versa? I dunno, and because they're so against the idea of actively being involved in religion that it's like, it can't, it has to be the means to an end rather than the other way round. It's kind of disturbing.

She adds that this attitude was heightened when she started wearing the ḥijāb. She recounts some of her friends' reactions to her decision to take off her headscarf nine months later: "I remember when I stopped wearing it a few people were like, oh so did you like break up with your boyfriend, like are you not together anymore? And I was like, I'm still Muslim! And we're engaged. So leave it at that."

Cassie and Penny both took umbrage at the assumption that they had converted to Islam solely to marry a Muslim, which they felt suggested that they were weak-willed and could not make decisions on their own. Cassie adds that the assumption that she must have taken off her scarf because she was no longer with her Muslim boyfriend could also have stemmed from a belief that

she had only worn it because he was "oppressing [her] and making [her] wear it." Such a line of questioning is presumably driven by a desire to rationalise why a person would convert to a religion with as much perceived cultural distance from whiteness as Islam, and particularly to understand why a woman would convert to Islam given the popular Orientalist construction of Islam as a misogynistic religion. Female converts thus elicit even more bewilderment, once again reflecting an Orientalist fascination with converts to Islam that aligns perfectly with popular Western notions of Islamic misogyny and ethnic patriarchy (Dunn et. al. 2007; Ho 2007). The operation of the trope of Islamic misogyny in white converts' post-conversion lives is further explored in section 5.3.4.

This section has illustrated that even though only two of the participants in this study explicitly identified their conversion as being 'for marriage,' many more participants were introduced to Islam through dating or marrying a Muslim. However, even those who were introduced to Islam through other means sometimes found that their peers assumed that they had converted for marriage, as they found it hard to understand why a person would convert to Islam, particularly if they were female. By focusing on the post-conversion experiences of converts to Islam instead of their reasons for conversion, this thesis goes beyond Orientalist fascinations with motivations for conversion, and instead draws attention to how converts experience race and racialisation after their conversion.

4.5.2 Intellectual decision

One of the most common explanations for conversion offered by participants was that their decision to convert to Islam was what they termed an 'intellectual' one. Intellectual, in this context, is presented as an alternative to an

emotionally or spiritually ordained experience. American sociologists of religion John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's popular typology of conversion (1981) describes intellectual conversions as coming about through a desire to learn about alternative belief systems and answers to questions of religion and God. Lofland and Skovond state:

> The "intellectual" mode of conversion commences with individual, private investigation of possible "new grounds of being," alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment, etc. by reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or "disembodied" ways in which it is increasingly possible sans social involvement to become acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life (1981, p. 376).

Liam's telling of his conversion narrative fits this profile. Having become a born again Christian at the age of 14, Liam explains that he had developed a "missionary zeal" which manifested in a desire to learn all he could about Christianity so that he could prove to people of other religions why Christianity was correct. This zeal led him to study comparative religions as an undergraduate student at university, where he became introduced to the concept of Sufism in Islam for the first time. He explains that it was through this secular study that he started to think more deeply about the concept of strict monotheism, and that it was this concept that attracted him to Islam and made him begin to question Christianity. Over the next few months, he started to learn more about Islam, but stresses in his interview that he always approached it with a "critical thinking, academic kind of analytical" approach. Liam is also very careful to emphasise that he viewed his conversion to Islam as an extension of his religious journey which was necessarily brought about through his sceptical worldview.

> I always get this question of, so how did you feel when you became a Muslim? And I'm always like, I didn't feel anything different. Well what do you mean? But we hear all these stories about people who cry… and I'm like well they might, but I had a relationship with God long before. This has been an addition,

a development, a moving further onward and upward in my journey, my spiritual journey, but it didn't begin here. I didn't have some sort of magic change. It was more of an intellectual shift.

Unlike Liam, Ben's intellectual interest did not stem from an interest in religion, but in history. Ben states that he had been reading about a number of religions from the Middle East to Far East for some years prior to his eventual conversion to Islam, but at the time characterised them as "intellectual traditions" rather than as faith positions. He reflected that he had what he terms a "bookish" interest in Islam, but that it slowly changed as he began to meet more Muslims and started to understand the overall teachings and messages of Islam. He was not seeking knowledge of other religions to understand or interrogate the contradictions he saw within Christianity, as he was not religious prior to is conversion; his intellectual interest was more in the history of different religions rather than in the specificity of their teaching. He emphasises that as he grew to learn more about Islam, he discovered:

> There was no real divide between them… The historical information and the corresponding teachings of the religion that came from that just resonated with me. That's why I decided to convert, because I had a deep resonance with the overarching teachings of the religion. And I understood from the historical background that they were good.

For Ben, the ideological and intellectual tradition that constituted Islam for him as a historian was no different from the religious tradition that he later learnt about – or at the very least, he found no inconsistencies between them. Riley expressed a similar discovery - like Ben, her initial interest in religion was a historical one, but after she started university and met people of different faith backgrounds she became curious about religions as belief systems as well as historical intellectual traditions.

> I think at that point in my life, I was just searching for some kind of meaning to life… I wasn't an atheist exactly but I was a skeptic, so I wanted to find out the

'truth', and Christianity just had too many internal logical fallacies and inconsistencies. At that time I knew a lot about Islamic history and empires but I knew nothing about the tenets of the religion itself.... It wasn't until I was in my second year [of university] I started reading about Islam as an actual religion. It wasn't long before I decided that Islam was the true religion, because everything within it was internally consistent.

Although Riley did not describe the intellectual and religious traditions of Islam as being inseparable, as Ben did, she too identified her conversion as an "intellectual conversion," as opposed to what she called an "irrational conversion." She emphasises that she does not view "irrational" or emotional conversions as being any less significant or powerful, but states that for her, conversion to Islam was a "purely rational, purely logical decision."

For Florian, the conversion process itself was one that emerged from intellectual inquiry, but he adds that he did not fully grasp the practices associated with Islam until much later on. Florian states that for him, converting to Islam was like "solving an intellectual puzzle," because Islam answered many of the questions and critiques that he had had of Christianity as a young adult. The actual practice of Islam came much later for him:

> From an intellectual point of view I was sort of already convinced that Islam was the right way. So I converted to Islam quite naturally because of that intellectual attachment to Islam. I would say that it's not until later that I realised... much later actually, 'til I arrived in Australia, that Islam was actually much broader than what I thought it was. So you know, the concept of submitting to Allah was... I realised it much later, and what it meant you know, the way it has to change your life.

Florian's discovery of the practical and ritualistic elements of the religion was in large part influenced by his exposure to Muslim communities in Sydney. Up until that point, Florian had been Muslim in belief alone, and had not changed his lifestyle.

In the interviews with Ben, Riley and Florian, it was clear that they considered it very important that I knew that their conversion was an intellectually determined one, which may have been in order to maintain their own concept of themselves as being rational, cognitively aware actors. While many other participants also had what can be deemed intellectual motifs for conversion, the ones documented in this section were the strongest in naming their conversions as intellectual conversions. Many other participants also emphasised the role of reading and researching in their conversion journeys, conforming to Lofland and Skonovd's profile. Some stated that they were searching for inconsistencies, mistakes, and internal fallacies, and it was only after this process that they felt able to convert.

Participants that cited intellectual motifs were also more likely to state that they felt their conversion stories disappointed Muslims who they felt wanted to hear about spiritual revelations; as Omar states, "They want to hear about the flash-of-light, revelatory moment, like Prophet Muhammad in the cave hearing Jibrail for the first time. They never say anything, but I can see the disappointment behind their smiles." This topic of disappointment about conversion stories will be explored further in Chapter Six. The following section deals with these 'spiritual' motifs, or in the nomenclature of Lofland and Skonovd, 'mystical' motifs and 'experimental' motifs.

4.5.3 Spiritual or emotional conversions

While the narratives discussed in the previous section can best be described as intellectual conversions, some participants described their conversion experiences as being spiritual, emotional or metaphysical. Of the small number of participants who used such descriptors, the motifs in the model presented by Lofland and Skonovd that are most suitable are the mystical and experimental

motifs. Mystical conversions, which Lofland and Skonovd describe as being "historically speaking, the best known" (1981, p. 377) occur without social pressure from members of the religious group in question, but unlike intellectual conversions, involve feelings or experiences that converts find difficult to explain.

Köse and Lowenthal's summary of Lofland and Skovond's model describes mystical motifs as "an affectively intense, brief, ineffable experience and often occurs when a person is alone. Social pressure is low; affective content involves awe, love, or fear; and the experience is followed by an active intensification of belief" (2000, p. 101). The small number of participants who fit this category often used words such as emotion or spiritual to describe their conversions. Tasneem explained that she had been religiously and spiritually inclined since she was 15 and considered herself a practising born again Christian, but had little knowledge about Islam until she went backpacking in Indonesia with her husband in her early 20s during the 1970s, at a time when very few Australians were traveling to Indonesia. She described meeting a Sufi group in Bandung made up of a club manager, a barber, a brain surgeon, a sailor and a boxer, and talking to them about philosophy, the meaning of life, religion and spirituality from sunset to dawn every night for two weeks. After two weeks they asked her to join them to visit their spiritual teacher who lived in the mountains of south-west Java. On their way to see him, they stopped at a barn which was filled with locals making *dhikr*, and it was in that room that she "just realised that [she] had to become Muslim:"

> So I prayed and asked for a sign, and there was a fly going around the food. Cos I had to have a sign. And I knew that when God called it didn't happen that often, and when he wanted something I wasn't about to turn my back on him after 9 years [of being a born again Christian]… So I said, if you want me to become Muslim, get the fly to leave the food and land on my middle finger and walk up my arm. And it did. So I cried again, and everybody's looking at

me and my husband's like, what is she doing now? So I prayed and prayed and cried and I said, 'Look, you know, it's a big thing, my family is nuts enough as it is being a born again Christian but becoming a Muslim is going to kill them. So make the fly do it again.' So it was just one big hall and all this food, and I could only see one fly. So it went all around the food and it came back and landed on my middle finger and walked up my arm again. And that's when I said the *shahādah*.

Stories such as Tasneem's were rare amongst participants, with most participants stating that they did not have a single 'revelation' that inspired them to convert to Islam. Some, such as Belinda, described a series of small 'wonders' that worked in tandem to confirm their growing belief in Islam. Belinda had started to attend classes about Islam before converting, because while she found some aspects of Islam compelling, she was not entirely convinced. She states that the first few classes were about confirming a belief in God, rather than in Islam specifically. Referring to the content of the classes, Belinda comments:

> Just look around us, you can see the signs of God, how could all of this be in creation if God didn't exist? …And a few weeks later we learnt about the Qur'an and that's what made me believe that the Qur'an is the word of God, cos of all its wonders. So after that I believed, it was quite simple. And then everything after I started doing, I started praying, even though I thought it was outrageous, fasting, even though I thought there's no way this could be good for you, everything you do, it helps you. So it just kept getting confirmed.

Here, Belinda expresses a mix of both mystical and experimental motifs. Experimental conversions are described by Lofland and Skovond as conversions where participants take part in the practices of the religion before they convert (1981, p. 378). These conversions usually take longer than mystical conversions, and are underpinned by curiosity. Although Lofland and Skovand state that these conversions are usually more common amongst "'new age,' metaphysical groups" (1981, p. 378), they acknowledge that they can also take part in conversions to more structured religions. In Belinda's case, she started

taking part in some of the ritualistic elements of the religion before she converted, and even though intellectually she found it hard to grasp, despite her better judgement she "felt" that it was good for her. This motif also emerged in other participants' stories, such as James, who stated that he felt a great peace when he prayed with his wife's family, even though at the time he did not believe in Islam.

Interestingly, of the participants who expressly stated that their conversions were "intellectual ones," some also conceded that there were emotional elements to their conversions, but downplayed these elements during the interview. Liam was one such participant who described an emotional "experimental" experience in the midst of his otherwise intellectual journey. Early on in Liam's study of Islam, he began to visit his local mosque, Gallipoli mosque in Auburn, where he met a Turkish Sufi *shaykh*. Liam reminisces:

> He taught me *dhikr*, some meditative practices, and I really felt peace during that engagement, and I really felt this connection with the Oneness of God. And it was a time in my life when I'd been through a lot of pain, a lot of hurt and it was quite a healing experience. So it was a taste, it was an *h'ors d'oeuvres* if you like, it was a very positive and peaceful experience. But it was not long after when I started to explore things a bit more deeply… because although emotionally that was what I needed at the time, I very quickly came back to my critical thinking, academic kind of analytical way of looking at things.

Like Belinda, it was through an act of Islamic worship – in Liam's case, *dhikr* – that he started to consider converting to Islam, as well as through his academic pursuits. Another participant, Florian, was careful to frame his conversion as an intellectual one, but describes two incidents which resonated with him on a deeper, more spiritual level. The first was during his confirmation as a teenager, a rite of passage in the Christian faith, when Florian's Christian paternal grandmother offered his mother a book about Islam as a gift. Reflecting on it, Florian states: "I only learnt about it after that, and I was like, puzzling me how,

why would she ever offer a book about Islam on the day - to my mother as a present for me having another step in the Christian faith. There was something that was puzzling me a lot after that. Which I took later to be as a sign of God, you know." The second incident occurred after he had started to think about the possibility of converting to Islam, while he was traveling through a highly religious area of Malaysia close to the border of Thailand:

> One day I was walking in the market and there was this man in sort of a white dress that comes to me and tells me Islam is great, you know tells me in English. And I remember telling him, well I don't know if it's great, but I'm very happy to be Christian. So he said to me, Islam is great. He repeated it another time. And then, I was a bit uncomfortable because he was sort of following me when I was walking. So I was going away and then he said to me a third time, Islam is great. And then he sort of disappeared and went away. So that stayed in my mind my whole life. It stayed very deeply.

These incidents did not have the dramatic and almost instantaneous effect on Florian that a mystical motif is characterised to have in Lofland and Skovond's model, as they did not immediately and directly cause him to convert; nonetheless, it still resonated with him and he later viewed them as possible, inexplicable 'signs.' From the above excerpts, it is clear that unusual or intense feelings accompanying 'signs' or the practice of Islamic rituals were a significant element of spiritual or emotional conversions amongst the participants in this study, but that wholly spiritual or emotional conversions were by and large uncommon. Oftentimes, however, otherwise 'intellectual' conversions did overlap with spiritual and emotional conversions.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide a necessary introduction to understanding the experiences of participants in their study after their conversion, by detailing their pre-conversion religious histories, contact with Muslims and reasons for

conversion. Through the illuminating stories and descriptions provided by Muslim converts in their interviews, Chapter Four has illustrated the diversity of convert experiences throughout the entire conversion process, from the initial catalyst for learning about the religion through to the convert's utterance of the significant and weighty *shahādah* or testament of faith, that demarcates the speaker as a believer in the religion of Islam.

The data captured in the interviews reflects the pre-existing literature on conversion: while some participants were driven by intellectual motivators, a number converted to Islam after developing a spiritual or emotional connection to the religion. Still others described what Tourage (2012, p. 211) calls an "on the road to Damascus" event, a Biblical reference to the sudden and transformative conversion of the Apostle Paul. This chapter highlighted that the vast majority of participants identified as having a Christian background, and that they had varying levels and modes of contact with Muslims prior to conversion – from wholly positive to wholly negative experiences, and everything in between. This chapter has also shown that the conversion narratives collected in this study were most often accompanied by intellectual, mystical or experimental motifs, with very few participants converting to Islam purely for the sake of marriage.

The conversion narratives offered by the participants not only provide a contextual basis on which to found a further exploration of their experiences as white Muslim converts, they also contribute rich empirical data to a field which is demonstrably lacking in Australian voices. The following chapters will explore the post-conversion experiences of participants in greater detail, as relates to whiteness and their racial identity.

CHAPTER FIVE

NAVIGATING WHITE AUSTRALIA

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter Four) detailed key elements of participants' journeys to conversion, and highlighted the commonalities and differences between their conversion narratives. Central to the narratives offered by participants were descriptions of their childhood, family life, religious education and religious beliefs prior to their conversion to Islam, their contact with and perception of Muslims during this time, and the motivations that led them to convert to Islam. Chapter Four demonstrated that many of the converts viewed the process or act of conversion as being unremarkable in some respects; even in cases where it may have come as a surprise to them.

This chapter is the first of three to examine more fully the experiences of participants *after* their conversion, with particular attention to the role of racialisation and the centrality of whiteness in shaping their interactions with both Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia. Through a comprehensive documentation and analysis of participants' stories, the following chapters will illustrate how whiteness is operationalised in Australian nation-building as a normative and discursively unmarked cultural space. Significantly, as I discussed in section 2.3, the Australian national identity has not just been constructed around the cultural space of whiteness (Hage 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2004, 2005; Schech and Haggis 2001; Osuri and Banerjee 2004), but around a specific, localised whiteness that is articulated through the lens of a Christian-coded secularism, a concept that I explored in depth in section 2.4

(Randell-Moon 2006; Sunderland 2007; Anidjar 2006; Imtoual 2004). Just as whiteness functions as a powerful yet unspoken cultural space and strategic rhetoric, central to the historical establishment of Australia as a settler colony and the current workings of Australian nationalism, so too does Australia's Christian heritage and culture, disguised behind a mask of loose secularism. In this arrangement, 'white' and 'Christian' are simultaneously coded as Australian, and are actively deployed as co-constitutive elements of the Australian nation. Interviews with white converts to Islam reveal that many participants' experiences of "Australianness" prior to becoming Muslim are racially and religiously inflected as white and Christian respectively, even if they did not previously subscribe to the Christian faith. As the following chapters will illustrate, participants' whiteness came under question once their religious identity changed to Islam, a religion racialised as non-white in Western nations generally, and often specifically as Arab or Middle Eastern in Australia (Poynting et al 2004).

In this chapter, I focus on participants' interactions with their non-Muslim family, friends, colleagues and strangers, to demonstrate that 'Muslim' is constructed by many non-Muslim Australians as a highly racialised category that is incongruent with whiteness. In a country where Christianity and secularism are coded white and Islam is coded non-white, the perceived differences between Australia's flexibly secular yet Christian-centric religious identity and Islam are deemed to be not just of theological origin, but of a racial one. In this characterisation, the cultural distance between Islam and whiteness is viewed as so vast as to be impassable, or at the very least, too challenging to dare try. My interviews revealed that several participants felt that this view was shared by some Muslims as well. However, Muslim expressions of the perception that Islam and whiteness are mutually exclusive took a significantly

different form to those conveyed by non-Muslims, and I have addressed participants' experiences with Muslims in Chapter Six. In this chapter, I further demonstrate that rather than being confined to specific settings, exchanges which locate white Muslim converts as outside or on the margins of the cultural space of whiteness due to their decision to take on a highly racialised identity occur in a number of different settings: from intimate discussions with family members, to navigating social gatherings with friends and colleagues, to racialised harassment and abuse from strangers in public places.

Through the examination of diverse interactions between participants and the groups identified above, I identify seven interconnected expressions of the idea that Islam and whiteness are incompatible and dedicate a subsection to examining each one. Section 5.2 deals with the idea that white Muslim converts have actively 'left' whiteness through the process of their conversion, most commonly expressed in participant testimonies through descriptions of direct exchanges with non-Muslims both known and unknown to them. In these interactions, it is clear that Islam is perceived as a race, not a religion. Amongst the converts interviewed, the participants who described such exchanges were most often ones who at the time adopted physical indicators of their Muslim identity, such as the *ḥijāb* for women or the beard and *kufi* for men. This section is further split into three subsections, each of which analyses a particular manifestation of the idea that white Muslims to Islam leave, relocate to the borders of, or betray whiteness after their conversion. Specifically, the three subsections analyse experiences where participants have been told that they are no longer white, are racially abused, and charged with race treason.

Section 5.3 builds on the experiences of converts addressed in 5.2 by extracting and analysing perceptions of Islam highlighted in their narratives that indicate that some non-Muslims situate Islam outside the scope of "Australianness," a

racially and religiously coded category. In this section, I focus on interactions where Muslims are portrayed as being situated outside the dominant and normative model of what it means to be Australian, which contribute to the racialisation of white converts in more subtle and covert ways. Rather than invoking racial categories that position white converts outside of whiteness, the interactions and exchanges highlighted in section 5.3 rely on the problematisation of Islamic culture instead. These exchanges evoke a form of racialisation that attaches to what has been termed by Barker (1981) as "new racism," as described and mapped in the literature review on Islamophobia and new racism detailed in section 2.3. Section 5.3 is thus broken down into four subsections, each highlighting a particular aspect of Islam that is viewed by some non-Muslims as a barrier to its assimilation into Australian culture. Namely, my thematic analysis of the interview data uncovered that some non-Muslims perceived Islam to be rigid, oppositional to secularism, and a national security threat. The analysis indicated that Islam's disavowal of alcohol and drinking culture was viewed as a problem by some non-Muslims. Finally, the operationalisation of the trope of Islamic misogyny - tied closely to constructions of (non-white) ethnic patriarchy – was also a recurring theme in the interview data.

5.2 Islam as a Non-White Race

The idea that Muslims are a racialised group in Australia and indeed, many other parts of the Western world, is not a new one. In sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this thesis, I reviewed a section of scholarship on race and racialisation to detail how the processes of racialisation can effectively render previously racially unclassified groups, such as religious communities, as raced. The Muslim

experience of racialisation in Western countries was explored further in section 2.3, where I contended that the racialisation of Muslims as non-white, and specifically as Arab and Middle Eastern in Australia, and South Asian in Britain, has led to the construction of a specific form of cultural racism against Muslims. For Muslims who are already racialised as 'non-white' due to their appearance, it is near impossible to separate the racism they experience as Muslims from that which they experience due to their non-white ethnic identity – these dual racialisation processes not only act simultaneously, but also in tandem. In contrast, white converts to Islam start from a position of being 'unraced' and invisible within the culturally neutral experience of whiteness, to becoming acutely racialised as non-white through the act of conversion. This section focuses on experiences of converts in which they were told that they were no longer white, race traitors (to the white race) or otherwise made to feel that they had adopted a new racial, as well as religious, identity.

5.2.1 No longer white

Qualitative information gathered from the interviews revealed a number of curious instances where participants were told directly, both by close relatives and complete strangers, that they were no longer white. Michelle related one such exchange with a co-worker "Joanne", which occurred when she was working at a popular department store in Sydney CBD. She had never met Joanne before, and Joanne only knew that she was expecting a "Michelle." Joanne's visceral reaction upon meeting Michelle led Michelle to surmise that her co-worker had not expected a blue-eyed, *ḥijāb*-wearing white woman. Reflecting on the incident, Michelle relates:

> I've been called a traitor before. I was told that I was no longer Australian 'cos I used to wear the scarf, by a co-worker when I worked at David Jones. She goes,

what nationality are you and I was like I'm Australian, I'm Caucasian. She's like – but you're Muslim. She's like, when you became Muslim, you became an Arab. You're not Australian.

Within this brief exchange lies a wealth of data about the conflation between race, national identity and religion. In Michelle's own words, 'Australian' and 'Caucasian' become synonymous with one another, and Caucasian – usually used as a racial classifier – is employed as a descriptor of nationality. In rebuttal to Michelle's response, Joanne seeks to revoke Michelle's self-identified racial and national identity simultaneously, by positioning whiteness and Australianness as unable to cohabit with a Muslim religious identity.

Stephanie describes a similar event that took place when she was volunteering at a charity event, although in her example it was the combination of both her *ḥijāb* and her "Aussie name" which caused confusion. She recollects that after noticing that a middle-aged man had been staring at her for a very long time, she finally decided to approach him:

> He barely looked at my face, he was staring at my name tag. He said, 'Stephanie… that's an Aussie name innit?' and I said yes, I was Australian. And he said, 'Why you wearing that thing on your head for, then?' and I explained that I'm Muslim yadda yadda… before I could even *finish* my sentence he said, 'Well, how come you have an Aussie name then?' By this stage I was yeah just a bit sick of it so I said that I'd converted to Islam, and he got very annoyed and said, 'Well if you're going to become an Arab and wear Arab gear you might as well get an Arab name, you shouldn't pretend to be an Aussie.'

Stephanie relates the event with laughter, but later expresses the unsettling discomfort she had felt later at home when unpacking the interaction in her mind, stating: "You kind of wonder you know, do they think you've actually transformed into another, a different race? Is it just a symbolic thing?" In both Michelle's and Stephanie's examples, the *ḥijāb* is identified as the instigator for the accusation that white Muslim converts had relinquished both their right to a white racial identity and an Australian national identity. A preliminary reading

of these interactions indicates that the *ḥijāb* itself is racialised, and by proxy, so are the bodies of the women who choose to wear it. The process occurs despite the fact that their bodies may not otherwise be available for racialisation, with their fair skin and light coloured eyes; the *ḥijāb* thus appears to replace the need for traditionally understood markers of race. Indeed, the hypervisibility of the *ḥijāb* renders invisible biological markers of race such as skin colour or facial features; or at the very least it renders *obsolete* the wearer's whiteness. The power of the *ḥijāb* to racialise white Muslim converts in this way can be understood through its close connection to the body. Unlike more abstract, metaphysical or otherwise visibly absent cultural inscriptions such as personal belief or private prayer, the *ḥijāb* is not only on the body, it becomes *of* the body, it comes to represent the totality of the body. As a result, the racialisation of the *ḥijāb* is closely tied to the racialisation of bodies that occurs against non-white peoples who are racialised for their skin colour, facial features, hair type and eye shape.

French philosopher Alia Al-Saji offers valuable insights about the mechanisms through which the *ḥijāb* becomes racialised. Writing about the 2004 French ban on *ḥijāb*, Al-Saji contends that attitudes towards the *ḥijāb* are a form of cultural racism which operates as a continuation of 'biological' racism precisely because of the role that "bodily difference" plays in both types of racism (2010, p. 889). She explains, "Cultural racism is not merely intolerance of the 'spirit' of another culture, it is directed at bodies, which this racist vision materially inscribes and perceives as culturally different. This racism naturalises cultural difference to visible features of the body, including clothing" (Al-Saji 2010, p. 889). Although al-Saji's focus is on the female headscarf, a similar argument can be made for other forms of clothing associated with Islam, such as the *niqāb* (face veil) worn by some Muslim women, and the *kufi*, turban, and/or *thawb* that some Muslim

men wear. These pieces of clothing fall under the category of "observable elements of culture" which Dunn et. al. suggest are one of the key mechanisms for the contemporary racialisation of Muslims in Australia and worldwide (2007, p. 567).

Al-Saji's suggestion that visible markers of culture *on* the body in the form of clothing act as an extension *of* the body is a compelling one, and invites greater discussion in light of the examples highlighted in this chapter so far. Although she firmly places the racism that the *ḥijāb* and other Islamic clothing attracts in the "cultural" racism camp, she adds that it acts as a continuation of "colour" racism because "In the cases of both skin color and veiling, racialisation functions largely through a visual register (although different perceptual, imaginary and discursive dimensions are also implicated)" (2010, p. 884). The act of seeing is thus not neutral, but draws on racial repertoires in a process that we are not even aware of participating in (2010, p. 885). Al-Saji's argument becomes even more persuasive when we examine the lineage of the concept of racialisation, a task that I undertook in Chapter Two.

Since then, other scholars writing about racialisation have highlighted the importance of the body to the experience of racialisation; in the words of Didier Fassin, "the body is the site of the racial experience" (2011, p. 419). Not, as he warns, because there is a self-evident or inherent relationship between race and the body in a biological sense, as promoted by the pseudo-scientific race theories of the modern era, but because processes of racialisation ascribe difference to bodies and called the categorisation of that difference, 'race.' Homi Bhabha supports Fanon's suggestion that skin is integral to racialisation and the creation of colonial stereotypes, stating, "Skin, as the key signifier of racial and cultural difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognised as common knowledge in a range of cultural, political, historical discourses, and

plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies" (1990, p. 30).

Bhabha goes on to argue that it is this very visibility and physicality of skin that attracts and even "authorises" discrimination: "The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural - colour as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural 'identity'" (1990, p. 32). Linda Martin Alcoff has also convincingly situated race in the site of the visual, noting the very real and very material consequences of race while simultaneously maintaining that the concept of race is "socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual and produced through learned perceptual practice" (1999, p. 17). Like Homi Bhabha, Alcoff draws attention to the centrality of the physicality and visibility of race, suggesting that our learned perceptual practices lead us to seek out cultural meaning in people's physical attributes and place them into racial categories. She states, "Because race works through the domain of the visible, the experience of race is predicated first and foremost on the perception of race" (1999, p. 20). Additionally, the racial differences that are read into features of the body are not simply constituted through the active perception of those features in the moment, but are built into our perceptual practices from a young age. When Alcoff states that "there is no perception of the visible that is not already imbued with value" (1999, p. 19), she reminds us that the act of perceiving is an epistemic practice that relies on pre-existing conceptual repertoires about race that are transmitted socially and culturally. In other words, two people may look at a third person and both place him or her in a different racial category, prioritise certain visible features over others in their assessment of the person, or read different meanings into the same features.

In this light, it is not improbable that markers of Islam like the *ḥijāb* can be viewed by some as extensions of the body: as a visually discernible feature that contribute to a particular perception of race because of the racial meanings and values ascribed to it in a given sociocultural context. The argument can be extended to other forms of clothing as well, such as *kufis.* Omar describes an incident where a parent from his son's school mistook him for a fair-skinned Pakistani man:

> She couldn't see past the kufi… I don't really wear it much anymore, well if I go to the mosque but in those days I wore it every, almost every day… It didn't strike me until much later in the conversation that she didn't realise I was white. And then it all came clear, why she'd gone on and on about traveling through India. Of course I told her, quite directly, that my mother was from Scotland and my father was sixth generation Australian and she looked affronted and said, "But I don't understand, I thought you were Muslim."

Omar qualifies his retelling of the story by explaining that he had a thick beard at the time, and reflects that his dark hair and dark eyes could have contributed to her assumption that he was from Pakistan. He finishes by saying, "At the end of the day though I still have white skin so I don't know." Omar's search for phenotypical features to explain her confusion over his racial identity proves fruitless, and so he surmises that it must have been his *kufi*: "She couldn't see past the *kufi*." As to why the parent racialised him as South Asian, rather than Middle Eastern which is more typical in Australia, he explained that she had told him she travelled extensively through India, which may have led her to associate Muslims, particularly *kufi*-wearing Muslims, with South Asia. Omar's suggestion is supported by Khyati Joshi's work on the racialisation of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the United States of America, where she states that "Many of the cultural markers of South Asian identity are actually religious markers as well" (2006, p. 215). Joshi goes on to list examples of these cultural markers:

> …they may include traditional garb such as the sari and salwaar kameez; the bindi or forehead "dot" worn by many Hindu women and some Hindu men; the ḥijāb (headscarf or "veil") traditional among Muslim women or the kufi (skullcap) worn by some observant Muslim men; and the dastaar, uncut hair, and other religious accoutrements worn by many Sikhs (2005, p. 215).

Omar's experience of being "read" as South Asian was unique amongst interview participants, as the vast majority of them related stories of being mistaken for Arab, Middle Eastern, or far less commonly, North African. This was true even for other men who sometimes wore the *kufi*, like Omar. If we take the position that the male *kufi* functions in a similar fashion to the *ḥijāb* and by extension, skin colour and other phenotypical features, it is very possible that Alcoff's principles apply to the *kufi* as well. That is to say, the way two different people perceive the *kufi* and read its wearer racially will necessarily be imbued with the values and assumptions that they hold, based on their individual experiences, and will affect how they categorise and classify the person wearing the *kufi*. Omar's story highlights that while Muslims in Australia are often racialised as Arab or Middle Eastern, as argued by Dunn et al (2007) and Poynting et al (2006), this need not be the case in all situations.

Joshi also offers another possible reason why Muslims in the US are often racialised as South Asian despite the fact that in popular American discourses, Islam is more commonly associated with Arabs. She states that "The answer lies at the intersection of Orientalist thought and the phenotypical similarity of South Asians to Arabs" (2006, p. 218), making the contention that most Americans know so little about the geographical region between Greece and Japan that they view the Middle East and South Asia as a monolith. Given that racialisation relies on the essentialisation of entire groups of diverse and heterogeneous peoples based on facial features and cultural markers, Joshi's proposal is arguably just as applicable in Australia. As this chapter will

demonstrate, the racialisation of Muslims in Australia is not always a specific or targeted process, and often constructs Muslims as "anything other than white."

Al-Saji's pertinent insights helps to explain how the wearer of visible signifiers of Islam such as the *ḥijāb* and the *kufi* can come to be racialised as broadly 'non-white.' My interviews with white converts to Islam who had experience of wearing such clothing indicated that it was not an uncommon experience, amongst my participant group, although often expressed in more subtle or indirect ways. Many of them expressed that they were surprised or even shocked when they realised that others now viewed them as non-white, and had never even thought of themselves as being raced (even as white). However, what of religious practices that are not visually perceptible? Is it possible to speak of the racialisation of religious practices, or even of entire religious communities?

It is clear from the interview data that at least some people do perceive Islam to be a 'race,' or at least, synonymous with 'the Arab race.' In the narratives of Stephanie and Michelle, their conversion to Islam was seen as congruent with them 'becoming Arab.' Without speaking to the people who accused them of 'becoming Arab,' however, it is impossible to know whether it was solely the *ḥijāb* that caused them to be racialised in that way, or whether it was because they had joined a community of faith that is typically associated with non-white people. One participant, Daniel, relates how his father told him that he was not white very soon after his conversion, despite the fact that he did not wear anything that would identify him as a Muslim to anyone else: "He said, 'You're not white, Daniel.' The implication was unlike himself, who was white. And I kind of made a joke about it, like, 'How can you be more white than [the Muslim] Bosnians who have blonde hair and blue eyes?'" Daniel explains that he was not surprised by the statement, stating: "In Bulgaria we have this saying

for a person converting to Islam which is called, translated of course, 'He became a Turk.'" Conversion to Islam thus becomes a conversion to a new ethnic identity as well, and in Bulgaria, this ethnic identity is always Turkish.

The reason for this can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire's rule of Bulgaria, and historical Bulgarian Christian anxieties about the Islamisation of the region. In Rossitsa Gradeva's chapter on the historiography of conversion to Islam in Bulgaria, Gradeva contends that the existence of Muslim communities in Bulgaria "is regarded as one the most negative Ottoman legacies in the region" (Gradeva 2011, p. 188) and nation building in Bulgarian in contemporary times relies on efforts to "neutralise" its impacts. She goes on to explain the impact of this on Bulgarian converts to Islam: "Over time the narrower notion of 'conversion to Islam' of local people was integrated into the wider ones of 'spread of Islam' and 'Islamisation,' both of which take into account the colonization and migration of Muslims, the establishment of the Islamic institutions, the construction of Muslim cult buildings and generally the appropriation of the Balkan space by the Ottoman authority" (Gradeva 2011, p. 188). The racialisation of Muslim converts in Bulgaria is thus inextricably tied to the Ottoman Empire, which led to the spread of Islam in the region and contributes to fears of continuing Islamisation today, despite census statistics indicating that affiliation to Islam is on the decline (Pamporov 2013, p. 188). Daniel's father's assertion that Daniel was no longer white by virtue of his conversion to Islam has parallels to the notion that in Bulgaria, whiteness is associated with Orthodox Christianity – conversion to Islam is effectively conversion into a Turk.

Gradeva's description of Bulgarian anxieties about Muslims is strikingly similar to fears of Islamisation in modern day Australia. In Australia, these fears are expressed through the increasing popularity of movements such as the anti-

ḥalāl and anti-Shariah movements, Reclaim Australia, and opposition to Islamic schools (Al-Natour 2010; Laforteza 2015) and mosque developments (Dunn 2001). It is clear that racialisation reflects the predominant social and political anxieties of the time. In their book 'Framing Islam' (2011), Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin write that cultural anxieties about the 'Other' have been expressed through Islamophobic and anti-Arab representations and stereotypes in the media, which in Australia instigate moral panics about people of Middle Eastern ancestry. In other countries, the racialisation revolves around other groups; for example, in Britain Muslims are racialised as South Asian (Moosavi 2015), in France, Muslims are racialised as North African (Allen 2005) and in Germany and Bulgaria, Muslims are racialised as Turkish (Allen 2005; Gradeva 2011). In section 5.3, I analyse in more depth the specific anxieties that non-Muslims expressed about Islam to the white Muslim converts I interviewed.

The findings highlighted in this section demonstrate how racialisation on a macro-level can manifest in micro-level interactions with white converts to Islam, in which they are told that they are no longer white, or perceived to be non-white, by virtue of their conversion to Islam. While this was not a commonly expressed view, at least within the stories of participants in this research project, the direct articulation of the idea that white converts to Islam have left whiteness behind is a useful starting point to consider the racialisation of Muslims in Australia. The following section explores how this same idea – that white converts have left whiteness and become non-white – is manifested through racialised abuse directed towards white Muslims.

5.2.2 Racialised abuse

Experiences of racism featured frequently in some participants' stories, and were particularly prominent in the interviews of those who were visibly identifiable through clothing and other religious markers discussed in section 5.2.1. The racism encountered by the white Muslim converts I interviewed spans a range of different forms: from institutional racism encountered when attempting to build a mosque or an Islamic school, or being denied opportunities at work, to interpersonal racism, including over the internet. In this section I specifically focus on interpersonal abuse, discrimination and harassment that designates the target as non-white - in other words, racism that identifies the target as not just Muslim, as say, the yelling of 'terrorist' or 'Osama' might signify, but as Muslim *and* of a different 'race'. This form of racism is dealt with here separate to more veiled forms of racism that participants experienced where they were cast as the cultural 'Other' through the use of metaphors and stereotypes that do not directly evoke the concept of 'biological' race. These experiences will be discussed in section 5.3.

It must be stated from the outset that the experiences of racism considered in this section – that is to say, those that are more aligned to the notions of race associated with biological racism – were far less common in the interview data than the more subtle cultural racism experienced by participants. The paucity of racial abuse identified in the interview data I collected supports the findings of Leon Moosavi, whose research on Muslim converts in Britain found that in the experience of his participants, "Islamophobia only rarely materializes in the form of violent attacks or transparent animosity, but surfaces more frequently on a mundane and discreet level" (Moosavi 2015, p. 48). This could in part be due to the fact that explicit references to race and ethnicity are now largely frowned upon, leading to the creation of alternate discourses that rely on

marginalisation and dehumanisation on the basis of culture and values instead (van Dijk 1993).

This is not to say that manifestations of contemporary Islamophobia never evoke race as a reified and essential aspect of a person's being, but simply that in the interviews I conducted, situations of race-based abuse were rarer. Examples of the latter were also more likely to be carried out by strangers in a public space or often from a passing car. Saffiah relates one such instance, which occurred when she was out shopping with her two young daughters after school. Although Saffiah does not wear *ḥijāb* herself, her daughters were wearing headscarves as part of their school uniform. She explains that she had noticed a woman walking very closely behind her for some time, but it was not until she identified herself as the children's mother that the women attacked them:

> She started swearing at me and calling me names, accusing me of all sorts of things, she called me the n-word a few times, a sand-n-word *laughs* I shouldn't laugh but it was just mental, absolutely mental and I didn't know what to do.

Here, the profoundly racist and historically loaded "n-word" is used to place Saffiah and her daughters outside of whiteness. Saffiah notes later that she thinks it was significant that the stranger did not begin her tirade until she overheard Saffiah identify herself as the girls' mother, as though to confirm that Saffiah was actually Muslim herself given that Saffiah did not wear a headscarf like her daughters. Once she had, she felt emboldened to racially abuse Saffiah and her daughters. When asked whether she thought that the woman knew she was white and it was the fact that Saffiah was Muslim that caused the woman to react the way she did, Saffiah immediately answers in the affirmative:

Oh yeah. 100 percent. I mean, look at me. I have blue eyes… It was winter so I didn't even have a tan. She definitely knew I was white, yeah. I'm obviously white. That's why she was so mad.

Saffiah's reference to her "obvious" whiteness mirrors the qualitative information gathered from an earlier project I conducted in 2010, in which two female participants expressed comparable sentiments (Alam 2012). The first woman, Tara, described a time when a man called her a "black slut." Recalling this incident, she exclaimed, "To me! Like dude, obviously I'm white!" and added, "I wear *ḥijāb* but I have Anglo features" (2012, p. 130). Similarly, referring to incidents of racism she faced, Alinta stated: "I put on the *ḥijāb* and look in the mirror, I still see me, I still look so white to me. With my blue eyes, and even though you can't see my hair, my skin was white… I look so Aussie!" (2012, p. 131).

In these three situations, the women themselves were confident in their own whiteness via their facial features, but felt that the perpetrators of the racism could not or refused to accept these features as 'proof' of their whiteness due to their wearing of the *ḥijāb*, and in Saffiah's case, her daughters' *ḥijāb*. Participants asserted their whiteness in an attempt to highlight the comicality of the interaction, and emphasise their belief that wearing the *ḥijāb* did not preclude them from the domain of whiteness. Importantly, both Tara and Alinta expressed that the racial abuse they experienced when they wore *ḥijāb* was a stark reminder of the fact that they had never previously been exposed to racial abuse prior to wearing *ḥijāb*. Tara recognised that she significant racial privilege over non-white Muslim women who are racialised regardless of whether they wear the *ḥijāb* or not, stating that she was "cognisant of the fact that if [she] ever wanted to take off my headscarf and walk down the street, all white privileges would ultimately, instantly return" (Tara quoted in Alam 2012, p. 135).

A number of other participants also described situations where they were at the receiving end of racial slurs. Xander stated that when he wore a thawb and kufi or turban, he has been called "wog, gyppo, Arab bastard, dune coon, raghead… I've been called a Paki by Brits in Australia. Anything you can think of." Xander adds:

> Usually they're just some idiots yelling from cars, it doesn't bother me anymore, they're cowards. I had one guy at work who kept calling me Iraqi Pete… I didn't even know who that was, I had to Google it. I'd say to him, "You know I'm not Iraqi right, Tim?" …He just ignored me, kept on going.

The slurs that Xander recounts are all markers of race, ethnicity and far off Middle Eastern deserts. None of them carry an explicit religious connotation - save perhaps for raghead, referring to a turban or *keffiyeh*, which are both types of headgear that are often associated with Islam. Other participants such as Maria and Jonathon described similar terms, the most common of which were 'wog' and 'Arab' followed by an expletive.

A popular phrase used to nominate the target of the racism as a foreigner was, "Go back to where you came from." The majority of participants described at least one incident that they experienced involving this phrase, or a variation of it such as "Go back to Baghdad," "Go back to Lebanon," or "Get back on your camel." When relaying these stories, Australian-born participants often expressed amusement at the fact that they were not seen as legitimately Australian because of their religious identity. It is not clear whether in such situations - which often took place in a fleeting moment as a car drove past or a person rode past them on the escalator – the perpetrator thought the target was white or not, though it is likely that both scenarios are possible given the nature of other exchanges described within this section. Importantly, the majority of the slurs locate the targets as being Middle Eastern, or in some

rarer situations South Asian, highlighting that in Australia, Islam is most often racialised as Arab or Middle Eastern.

The findings in this section highlight that direct interpersonal Islamophobic abuse and harassment in Australia is often operationalised through the racialisation of Muslims and Islam, through the use of racist and xenophobic slurs that mark the target as being 'non-white'. In these attacks, markers of a Muslim religious identity such as the *ḥijāb* and *kufi* are imbued with racial meaning that serve to essentialise and stigmatise the wearers of these markers. As I demonstrated through my review of academic scholarship about Islamophobia in section 2.3, it has been suggested that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism that is enacted through references to cultural practices and markers, such as clothing. I argue that cultural racism operates through the racialisation of such practices and markers, which is highlighted by the experiences of white converts to Islam who are subject to racial slurs that designate them as being non-white due to their clothing. My interviews with white Muslim converts suggests that in Australia, Islamophobia is operationalised through the racialisation of Muslims and Islam.

5.2.3 Race treason

Though only very rarely mentioned in the interview data, race treason nonetheless emerged as a concept that was used by some non-Muslims in relation to white Muslim converts. The label of the 'race traitor' is often used pejoratively to describe a person who acts against or betrays his or her own perceived race. In modern day usage, a cursory glance at articles, books and websites that contain the term indicates that there are two main groups who use 'race traitor' as part of their ordinary discourse – white nationalists, such as those who frequent websites like Stormfront.com, and white critical race

theorists like Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (1996), who call for the abolition of the white race and all races as a social construct. While the former group uses the term to refer to other white people who they believe act to the detriment of the white race, the latter use the term race traitor to describe themselves. White nationalists look to uphold the boundaries of race, and enforce it through strict racial segregation; race traitors thus include people who are in inter-racial relationships, have mixed children or promote multiculturalism or the interests of non-white groups through social policy, political means, and so on. In contrast, white abolitionists call for the eradication of the concept of race altogether, claiming that "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (racetraitor.org, 2015). In the context of the experiences recounted by participants, it is unlikely that people who apply the term 'race traitor' to white Muslim converts are implying that the target is a white abolitionist. It is far more feasible that in such situations, they are using race traitor to denote the original meaning of the term - a derogatory name for someone who has committed treason against the white race. White Muslims are perceived to have betrayed other white people by converting to a religion that has been racialised as non-white.

Curiously little has been written about the concept of race treason as used by white nationalists, and even less literature has examined the notion with regards to white converts to non-Christian religions. Two exceptions to this rule can be found in the works of historians Margaret Denike and Martha Ertman, both writing on Mormonism in America in the 19th and 20th centuries – a religion which adherents consider to be a part of Christianity, but is rejected by other Christians. Denike (2010) and Ertman (2010) argue that the polygamous practices of Mormons in America were vilified not just because they were an alternate form of cohabitation and marriage to the heterosexual and

monogamous cultural norms in America, but specifically because polygamy was a racialised practice that was associated with Muslims and non-white cultures. Polygamy was viewed as a primitive and savage tradition, common for people of colour but unnatural for white people. In some cases, Mormons' polygamous practices saw them cast as being non-white themselves. Drawing attention to the numerous mediums engaged during the anti-polygamous movement, Ertman claims that "Again and again, commentators from high culture (media and legal experts mainly) and popular culture (cartoonists and authors of magazine articles) portray Mormons as barbaric, lascivious, despotic, disorderly, foreign, Black, Asian, and/or childish" (Ertman 2010, p. 308). Importantly, as Denike and Ertman both illustrate, polygamy as a religious act was also alternatingly constituted as a form of race treason. In other words, in addition to the representations of Mormons as Black and Asian in both high and popular culture (Ertman 2010), Mormons were still sometimes portrayed as white, but as white *race traitors*.

Denike's and Ertman's research has implications for this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it indicates that historically, non-normative and racialised religious practices have been viewed as race treason in some contexts. But secondly, and even more significantly, polygamy is specifically racialised as non-white because of its connection with Islam. As Denike notes, anti-polygamous discourses which cast Mormons as race traitors were rooted in Orientalism and Islamophobia, as polygamy was represented as a barbaric Islamic practice, far removed from the sexual morality of Christianity (2010, p. 863). She draws on a number of historical sources to make her argument, including an excerpt from the first Supreme Court decision to rule in favour of upholding anti-bigamy laws, which stated that "'[p]olygamy has always been odious among the northern and western nations of Europe, and, until the establishment of the

Mormon Church, was almost exclusively a feature of the life of Asiatic and of African people" (Denike 2010, p. 855). In her article, Denike paints a compelling image of the way in which xenophobia and racism intertwine with Islamophobia in the anti-polygamy movement in America:

> From the moment that the exclusively white members of the Church came to the defense of polygamy, it was incessantly analogized to ''Mohamedism'' (as a form of false prophecy that has led entire races astray), as it was to the sexual excesses of Middle Eastern ''harems.'' The emergent anti-Mormon stereotypes drew their critical force from a Christian sexual morality of monogamous restraint, which was made righteous by way of its difference from the sexual excesses of uncivilized and barbaric others, the evil of whom has been historically metaphorized through sexual transgression (Denike 2010, p. 863).

Although Denike and Ertman focus on Mormons in America, the root of the sentiment that Mormons are race traitors lies in the conceptualisation of Islam as a highly racialised religion, a conceptualisation that is infused with Orientalist fantasies of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. It is perhaps appropriate then that their work should inform this section, which looks at three incidents where participants were called race traitors, emerging from the qualitative data. One exchange has already been discussed earlier in this section, in relation to Michelle who was called a traitor by a work colleague. Although the colleague did not call her a "race traitor" specifically, her accusations that Michelle was no longer white or Australian indicates that the perpetrator felt that Michelle had reneged on her allegiance to both her race and her country. In an interaction related by Jason in his interview, the charge was made more obscurely, and Jason was reluctant to relate it to race treason:

> My friend that took it the hardest was probably Pat. He's not a bad bloke, but he's very… sheltered is probably too kind a word. Living in the Shire, you know, he didn't take my converting well. Probably the last time I saw him, I mean I saw him around but the last time he spoke to me, he'd had a bit to drink

and he called me a traitor, you know, Muslims are this and this and now you're one of them, you're a traitor.

When I asked Jason if his friend Pat meant a traitor to the white race, he hesitated for a moment before answering:

No, I don't think he meant like… Nah, Pat wouldn't… he talked a lot of this and that you know, but he wasn't like that. Race traitor sounds a bit Nazi, like. Pat isn't… I don't think he's like that. He was just pissed off. Maybe a traitor to the Shire is what he meant, because of the Cronulla Riots.

Jason's equivocation with regards to his friend's behaviour is likely partly out of loyalty and partly due to the ambiguity of Pat's statement, and Jason's reluctance to draw more meaning from it than was intended. It is also possible that Pat may have meant to suggest that Jason was a traitor to the Australian nation, or even to Cronulla. Without speaking to Pat himself, we can only guess at his intended meaning. What is illuminating, however, is Jason's response to Pat's words, and his reaction to my suggestion that Pat may have meant that Jason was a race traitor. Jason's dismissal of Pat's words and hesitance to entertain my suggestion was representative of his more general unwillingness throughout the interview to talk about race or acknowledge racism. For example, despite evoking the Cronulla Riots in his interview himself, Jason did not acknowledge the racialised nature of the events that led to the riots and the riots themselves, instead framing them as an issue of territory and geography free of any racial connotations.

The denial of racism as an operative factor in these and other situations is a persistent theme of Jason's interview. Indeed, the denial of racism was a common theme in the interview data more generally, most often appearing when participants described the responses of their close friends and family members to their conversion. The pervasiveness of racism denial in the interviews is unsurprising given that the denial of racism is an element of

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modern racism (Nelson 2013, van Dijk 1992) and even "one of the defining aspects of contemporary racism in settler societies like Australia" (Dunn & Nelson 2011, p. 589). The denial of racism on an individual level can emanate from the desire to protect oneself against a charge of racism, and this desire can arguably be extended to relatives and close friends as well, as is suggested by the interview data. However, as Nelson points out, the denial or downplaying of racism can also occur in members of groups who are often targeted by racism as a form of self-protection. It is thus possible that for some participants, their denial of anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by people close to them could not simply be an attempt to protect those friends and relatives from the charge of racism, but could also emanate from a need to protect themselves against the belief that the people around them hated or feared a central part of their identity.

Potentially, the inclination to protect one's 'self' or others from the charge of racism can extend even to a 'place', in situations where people feel very strongly connected to their local area. Nelson suggests that this phenomenon occurred around the Cronulla Riots in Sydney, stating that while some people may avoid associating themselves with a stigmatised area, others "associate so strongly with their local area that the distinction between self and place identities becomes blurred." This blurring of self and place is arguably identifiable in Jason's interview. For example, Jason's denial that the Cronulla riots were informed by racism extended to his denial of racism in the area as a whole, as he states, "the Shire gets a bad rap, but people who live here, it's usually people from outside of the Shire who say it's racist, but we're actually very open to multiculturalism down here." Jason's quotation provides us with an exemplar of what Nelson refers to as a process of "place-defending," in which "attachments to place, or the desire to protect one's local area from being

branded a racist space, can lead to the denial of racism or a reluctance to acknowledge racism within a particular place" (Nelson 2014, p. 68). Jason's denial that racism exists in Cronulla or the Sutherland Shire is demonstrative of his broader avoidance of any discussion about race or racism during his interview.

In contrast to Jason's reticence to consider the connotations of the word 'traitor,' Riley indicated that the intended meaning of the term traitor to describe her was exceedingly clear. Like Michelle, she was wearing a *ḥijāb* at the time of the incident, which took place during a soccer match. During a refereeing disagreement, one of the other team's players called her a race traitor under her breath. Riley explains that she used to play soccer with the perpetrator years earlier, before Riley moved suburbs and changed teams. Although they did not know each other well, seeing each other only occasionally at matches and training, Riley stated that the other player had expressed mild disapproval when she discovered that Riley had converted. Despite this, Riley indicates that she had not expected the attitude at all:

> I was speechless, I didn't know what to say. At first I thought I'd misheard her but you don't mishear something like that. It's not exactly a common thing to say right, 'race traitor,' what does that even mean?

Whilst in Michelle's narrative, the charge of race traitor is followed with an explicit statement that Michelle is no longer white, Jason and Riley did not describe otherwise racialising language during the exchange. Instead, the charge of race traitor implies that while they are still considered white, white Muslim converts are perceived to have switched allegiances, to have joined the 'other side' – unlike non-white converts who were always there. The concept of 'race treason' constructs race in the same way that the modern nation state is constructed: an entity that one can defend, pledge allegiance to, or wage war

against. Indeed, the articulation of race as a nation was central to 19th century ideas of race, and is at the heart of fascist and white nationalist ideology and political movements that seek to restrict national identity and even state citizenship to specific groups on the grounds of race (Conversi 2004, Leonard 2009).

As I outlined in Chapter Two, whiteness underpinned the formation and maintenance of the Australian nation state itself through the genocide and forced expulsion of Aboriginal peoples from their land. Later, after its federation in 1901, the idea of Australia as a white nation was maintained through policies such as the White Australia Policy, operationalised primarily through the Immigration Restriction Act as well as other laws and policies that had to conform to the ideals of the White Australia Policy (Ganley 2006, p. 13). It is clear from parliamentary records that the Immigration Restriction Act was formulated with the intention of creating a racially pure nation, in light of anxieties about Chinese and other non-white immigration. The perceived superiority of 'the white race' is virtually unchallenged in the debates that took place; for example, the then Prime Minister Edmund Barton stated in Parliament that:

> I do not think either that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races - I think no one wants convincing of this fact - unequal and inferior. The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality [sic]. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others (Barton quoted in Cooper 2012).

In his characterisation of the superiority of the white race, Barton, and indeed many members of Parliament, relied heavily on the work of historian Charles

Pearson, and his 1894 book "National Life and Character: A Forecast." In it, Pearson argued that Australia was the last remaining nation in which 'the higher races' could flourish:

> The day will come, and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races... We shall wake to find ourselves elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we looked down upon as servile, and thought of as bound always to minister to our needs... Is that not something to guard against? We are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live and increase freely for the higher civilization (Pearson 1894, p. 16-17).

Pearson uses the phrase "higher races" to refer to "Aryan races" rather than one "race," which he distinguishes along the lines of nation. He highlights the significance of Christianity and cultural mores to maintaining white supremacy, stating: "We were struggling among ourselves for supremacy in a world which we thought of as destined to belong to the Aryan races and to the Christian faith; to the letters and arts and charms of social manners which we have inherited from the best times of the past" (1894, p. 89-90). Pearson's work was highly influential in the development of the Immigration Restriction Act, driving already existing fears about the impact of non-white immigration on white Australia's religious, cultural and social values.

The impact of *terra nullius* and the White Australia Policy in naturalising whiteness as a central component of Australianness cannot be understated, and the legacy of Australia's formative years as a nation state is perceptible in virtually all aspects of society today. Writing in the aftermath of the official abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1973, Peter Corris noted that racialism, articulated through the privileging of whiteness, found expression in Australian public life through "the constitutions of exclusive clubs, in political rhetoric from trade union minutes to ministerial speeches; in literature from bush ballads to novels; in the courts and the justice they dispense; in the press and in

sport" (1973, p. 750). Ransley and Marchetti have identified the "hidden whiteness of Australian law" as a procedural barrier for Indigenous people in the Australian courts, because of the cultural bias of Australian legal systems that privileges the ontological positioning of whiteness (2000, p. 139). More recently, Mary O'Dowd has pointed to the national mythology surrounding the 'Aussie bushman' and the ANZAC soldier to assert that whiteness and maleness are both central to the notion of what it means to be Australian. Speaking about the image of the Australian bushman, she remarks:

> The national man in the narrative of Australian identity was a somewhat conceited image in terms of its portrayal of Australian manhood physically… and somewhat conceited in its image of Australian male psychology with relationships characterized by mateship, friendliness, larrikinism and egalitarianism as evidenced in the Australian literature of poetry and stories by men such as Lawson and Patterson (2009, p. 807).

These same characteristics are also raised in Moreton-Robinson's critique of former Prime Minister John Howard's reification of Australian 'diggers' (2005). Moreton-Robinson states that during his leadership, Howard deployed the figure of the Australian soldier in nationalist rhetoric to implicitly associated 'Australianness' with the "white heterosexual male" who "represents the core national values of mateship, egalitarianism and the fair go" (2005, p. 22). She goes on to argue that this framing of Australianness excludes a number of groups from the category of "Australian" while attempting to obscure the role of Australian soldiers in securing Australia as a white possession, stating: "Such an embodiment implicitly excludes non-white migrants and Indigenous people from holding such core values… The core values which were displayed by the diggers on the battle fields were never linked to their colonial origins and the part they played in claiming the nation as a white possession" (2005, p. 22).

Thus, while whiteness is no longer explicitly stated in official discourse, its legacy is still apparent in Australian public and social institutions, media, arts

and cultural life, and remains central to Australian nation itself. We increasingly find that the discourse is shifting from simply situating Muslims as threats to the Australian culture to calling into question their loyalty to the Australian nation and their commitment to their Australian citizenship. Joshi suggests that Muslims and other non-Christian people in America who are mistaken for Muslim come to represent not just a culturally inferior group, but a "fifth column," asserting that "brown-skinned, non-Christian Americans become more (or less) than just an *other* within the society; they become an other who is associated with a foreign enemy. They go from merely being a minority to being viewed as a potential 'fifth column' due to their presumed connection with and loyalty to this enemy" (Joshi 2006, p. 217).

Indeed, as Akbarzadeh and Roose (2011) contend, the construction of Muslims living in the West as a 'fifth column' – a term for traitors or spies that first came into usage during the Second World War – has gained significant traction amongst extremist right wing authors. Akbarzadeh and Roose state that "In recent years, a great deal of literature has been published in Western nations that has sought to portray Western Muslims as a "fifth column"—that is, as an "enemy within," collectively seeking to destabilize Western nations' identity and values for the benefit of an international Islamic movement intent on the establishment of a caliphate" (2011, p. 310). Fethi Mansouri's article on the racialisation of Muslims in the West supports the conclusions of Joshi and Akbarzadeh and Roose, contending that since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Muslim Australians "have had their personal 'integrity and loyalty as citizens' questioned (Mansouri 2010, p. 254). The analysis offered by the aforementioned scholars is startlingly similar to Ertman's description of the castigation of Mormons as race traitors, where she surmises: "While Mormons' distinctive theology and social organization were politically unsettling in many

ways, the practice of polygamy justified the larger culture's demotion of Mormons from full citizenship on the grounds of racial inferiority" (2010, p. 288). White converts to Islam are thus viewed as doubly suspicious – not only are they cast as potential traitors to their country, as Muslims, but where the Australian nation is also constructed as white and Christian, white converts are also viewed as traitors to whiteness. This is the case even if they have not engaged in any specific acts of treason against Australia – their conversion is evidence enough of that treason.

5.3 Islam as Un-Australian

In the previous section, I examined interview data that highlighted that Islam is constructed by some non-Muslims as a racialised identity that is perceived to be far removed from whiteness, through examples that evoked long-established racial categories. Here, I will build on my discussion of the centrality of whiteness to the Australian nation to explore how the same understanding of Islam is manifest in more indirect forms of racialisation that rely on the construction of Islam as culturally distinct and even deviant from Australianness. Integral to the characterisation of white Muslim converts as having 'left' whiteness through their conversion is the fear that converts are no longer able to be truly Australian, because of the perceived cultural distance between what it means to be Muslim and what it means to be Australian. My detailed review of the literature on the relationship between whiteness and national identity in Australia in Chapter Two (section 2.3) demonstrates that there is a continuing conflation between race and nation in what it means to be considered Australian. Indeed, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out, the discursive construction of Australia as a white possession has been an ongoing project of nation building in Australia since invasion. In this section, I assert

that the juxtaposition of Islam as oppositional to Australian culture and the Australian 'way of life' is reliant on two premises: firstly, that Muslim is a racialised identity, unlike whiteness which is normative, and secondly, the more cultural capital a person accrues from their whiteness, the larger their claim to being Australian. I draw on the extensive historical and sociological literature that maps the way the Australian nation is constructed around the identity of whiteness to argue that for white Muslim converts, their changed relationship with aspects of Australian culture does not just present a challenge for their Australianness, but also their whiteness.

The interview data reveals a number of key elements of Australian culture which are evoked in these exchanges. The first of these to be examined in this section is religion, and in particular a Christian-coded secularism which allows for the public vocalisation or performance of certain faiths only in very particular circumstances. Religion is tolerated in Australia with the understanding that people of non-Christian faith are not to display their religion *too much*: in the Australian practice of secularism, religion is to be private and hidden, with the exception of Christianity which is accepted because of its association with whiteness and Australianness. Alcohol was also commonly raised as an Australian cultural element, with participants stating that they felt their decision not to drink was often highlighted by peers and colleagues in social situations. Clothing featured significantly in the qualitative data gathered from female converts, and is explored in detail in section 5.3.4 on the gendered nature of the racialisation that white converts experience. Many of these anxieties about Islam and its incompatibility with Australianness contribute to the constructions of whiteness that were explored in the previous section.

5.3.1. Islam as a departure from Christian-coded secularism

Conversion to a religion necessarily requires a conversion out of another faith position, whether that is a religion, agnosticism or atheism. In the case of white Australians converting to Islam, it can also signal a conversion out of both whiteness and Australianness, where 'Australianness' is coded as white. As I indicated in Chapter Four, the majority of the participants in this study identified as being nominal or practising Christians prior to their conversion, and also described Australia's religious identity as being secular and simultaneously Christian. In this section, I will draw on interview data to demonstrate the view that not only is the Australian nation constructed around whiteness, but also a modern secular order that operates as a manifestation of Christianity. The relationship between Australianness and Christianity is detailed in depth in section 2.4 through a comprehensive review of the literature that highlights that not only is the identity of 'Australian' dependent on whiteness and Christianity to sustain itself - but that whiteness and Christianity share a discursive link beyond their association with the white nation. In this section, I extend my previous argument by positing that the religious identity of Australia is not wholly Christian, but that the concept of 'Australian' relies on a secularism which is founded by and upon Christianity, and tries to mask the importance of Christianity in public life while simultaneously amplifying it. In other words, while I agree with the arguments made by the Australian scholars whose work I detailed in section 2.4, who contend that the Australian nation is underpinned by a Christian religious identity, I argue that the racialisation of Muslims in Australia relies upon the construction of Islam as antithetical to secularism just as much as it is oppositional to Christianity.

To demonstrate this argument, I rely on the work of sociologists Gil Anidjar, Graeme Smith, Holly Randell-Moon and Talal Asad. Anidjar and Smith contend that the modern secular order in Western countries can best be understood as the latest public manifestation of Christianity, rather than a repudiation of Christianity. According to Smith, secularity is simply "Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine (2007, p. 2)." Through his historical analysis of Western secularism, Smith demonstrates how secularism and Christianity can and do operate simultaneously in the cultural space of the West, stating, "It would not be possible to describe Western society as only secular without ignoring the significant religious indicators picked up regularly in surveys. Nor, however, can we describe the West as Christian – the picture is far more complex than that." Smith contends that the secularisation of Western societies that accompanied the Enlightenment inhibited the discussion of Christian doctrine in the public sphere, but that Christian ethics and 'values' remained central to the workings of public life in Western modernity. The findings that I analyse in this chapter speak to the "complexity" that Smith identifies.

Anidjar has provided a more detailed and thorough theoretical discussion of how Christianity and secularism are mutually operative in the West in his article 'Secularism,' where he proclaims:

> I propose to take for granted that the religious and the secular are terms that, hopelessly codependent, continue to inform each other and have persisted historically, institutionally in masking (to invoke Asad's term) the one pertinent religion, the one and diverse Christianity and Western Christendom… Like that unmarked race, which, in the related discourse of racism, became invisible or white, Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular and thus made religion" (2006, p. 62).

Anidjar goes on to argue that Christianity rebranded – or in Anidjar's word, "reincarnated" itself as secularism, and that it is not so much that secularism masks Christianity, but that they are in and of themselves the same thing. In

the face of increasing criticism about Christianity and the possibility of losing its institutional power, Anidjar contends, Christianity recreated itself as secularism in order to retain its power, stating that "secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions. And the question now remaining is whether there was a specific religion that was particularly targeted with this name" (2006, p. 62). Anidjar makes clear in his article that a specific religion *has* been targeted with the name of religion in the creation of secularism in the West, and that religion is Islam. While Islam is a 'religion' and 'non-white' and 'foreign', Christianity is 'secularism,' 'white' and 'Western' in the way it functions as a normative and invisible part of Western nation states. He adds that "secularism and secular criticism are unified practices that continue to function in the way Christianity has for centuries… Secularism is part of a discourse of power and of institutions that are bent on making us invest religion, making us cathect it" (2006, p. 62). In the secular nation, religion and the state are kept separate, and religion in this case does not include Christianity, having been absorbed into secularism. If we agree with Anidjar's proposition, secularism does not simply mask the Christian history and values of a nation, but it *is* Christianity, reincarnated.

Like Smith, Anidjar applies his theory to the entirety of the Western world, but it is useful to consider how his theory may apply to Australia specifically. Is it possible for a state to be both Christian and secular at the same time, and if so, what does it look like in practice? In my review of the literature in section 2.4, I drew attention to the work of several Australian scholars who have persuasively argued that Australian nationhood has been driven by Christianity, with reference to political discourse historically and in recent years. Commentators have also pointed to other indicators that Australia is not

a strictly secular state, such as the inclusion of the Lord's Prayer in Parliament, tax breaks for religious institutions, public holidays based on Christian celebrations, and Christian references in statutory oaths and pledges (Chavura and Tregenza 2015). It is clear that in Australia, references to Christian doctrine do still exist in public discourse, acting contrarily to Smith's suggestion that Christian doctrine has been banished from the public sphere in the West. Holly Randell-Moon has pointed out that this is possible because Australian constitutional law allows for the state to be neutral towards religious matters, rather than strictly divorced from them. She states that according to the wording of section 116 of the Constitution, "As long as there is no state established religion, the overt presence of religion in parliamentary arrangements, such as the Lord's Prayer, is permitted constitutionally" (2013, p. 353). In other words, as long as the government does not establish Christianity as a state-religion which all of its citizens must adhere to, references to Christianity or state-funded support for religious institutions such as religious schools and organisations are allowed by the constitution.

Randell-Moon contends that rather than Australia being an exception to the 'rule' of secularism, the very nature of the relationship between secularism and the state, which can exist only due to state sovereignty, means that it is impossible for a nation state to be completely secular (2013). To demonstrate her point, Randell-Moon draws on the work of prominent sociologist of religion Talal Asad, who in his chapter "Trying to Explain French Secularism" suggests that secularism is not about the strict separation of religion and state, but the sovereignty of a state which allows it to decide when and under which circumstances they should make exceptions to their general rule of neutrality/secularity. Asad uses the example of France and its ban of Muslim headscarves to argue that "it is not the commitment to or interdiction of a

particular religion that is most significant in this principle but the installation of a single absolute power - the sovereign state - drawn from a single abstract source and facing a single political task: the worldly care of its population regardless of its beliefs" (2006, p. 6). The same sovereignty that allows the French government to provide chaplains in the army, schools, and hospitals at the expense of the state also allows the French government to legislate against the wearing of *ḥijābs* in public schools. If secularism was truly about the separation of the state and religion, he remarks, secularism would look more or less the same around the world; the reason it does not is because of state sovereignty, as each nation state makes its own decisions about what religious exceptions they will allow for.

Randell-Moon applies the insights derived from Asad's discussion of French secularism to Australia, and extends his argument to assert that the 'secular contract' formed between Australian secularism and sovereignty is one that is inherently racialised, because Australian sovereignty itself is racialised (2013, p. 360). Utilising Moreton-Robinson's concept of the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" (Moreton-Robinson 2004, para 7, as cited in Randell-Moon, p. 360), she contends that Australian sovereignty "is not just concerned with fostering a neutral and universal law, but also involves the exclusion of Indigenous sovereignty as a competing authority, so that Australian law is neither neutral nor universal" (2013, p. 360). Thus, any exceptions to the rule of secularism that the Australian state makes are specifically a demonstration of white sovereignty, rendering Australian secularism – and its exceptions to its own secularism – racially inflected as white. Using examples of Australian legislation and High Court rulings, she demonstrates that not only is the Australian state neither racially nor religiously neutral, but that if "the religious neutrality of the Australian state is

compromised by the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty, then the operation of this sovereignty affects which religions can be accommodated by the state" (2013, p. 361). The effect of this, as Randell-Moon has argued in a previous article, is that "Religious values that privilege specific forms of whiteness can be rendered invisible through the assumption of secularity" (2006, p. 4). In Australia, the religious values Randell-Moon refers to are Christian, which is apparent in the examples I provided earlier in this section such as Australian public holidays and the Lord's Prayer in Parliament.

Randell-Moon's assessment allows us to conceptualise how Anidjar's theory - that Christianity and secularism function in tandem – operates in an Australian context, enacted through the nation's white sovereignty. She demonstrates that the 'secular contract' that is produced through the relationship between secularism and Australian sovereignty is racialised as white, and the religious exceptions authorised by the Australian state reflects the whiteness of the secular contract, visible in the fact that the majority of religious exceptions in the public sphere are granted to Christianity. In this way, Christianity maintains a powerful place in Australian society, but in a way that masks its doctrinal aspects.

The work of Anidjar, Smith, Randell-Moon and Asad helps us to understand how Australian nationhood can be constructed as both secular and Christian at the same time, which is an important premise to understanding the experiences of participants in this research project. While a number of participants stated that it was their exit from Christianity that worried their family and close friends, for the majority of participants who came from nominally Christian or agnostic/atheist backgrounds, it was Islam's perceived incompatibility with secularism that caused the greatest concern. Significantly, when asked what they thought Australia's religious identity was, almost all of the participants

stated that it was secular, and the vast majority of those participants added that Australia had "Christian roots," "Christian culture" or a "Christian core." It is clear from the interview data that Christianity and secularism were both considered by participants to be important elements of what it meant to be 'Australian,' in this context code for white. Additionally, as I will argue in this section, Islam was viewed as problematic by some people not just because it was not Christian but because Islam was not as 'secular' as Christianity was perceived to be; Islam is too 'visible,' 'rigid' and 'dogmatic' in comparison with the perception of Christianity in Australia.

Most often, anxieties about participants' deviation from Christianity came from parents and other close relatives of the converts. While sometimes these anxieties were theologically grounded – in the words of Omar, his parents were "concerned for the welfare of [his] soul" – at other times, they were based on a fear of what it would mean for the participant's cultural engagement with Christianity. A small number of participants stated that their family's reaction to their conversion was primarily out of concern for the fact that they had converted to a religion that was different to the one that they had been raised in. In these cases, their families – usually at least one parent - were significantly religious themselves, and that their childhoods had had a strong religious presence and Christian education. Conversion to Islam, then, was regarded in the same way that a conversion to any religion outside of Christianity would have been, at least insofar as participants narrated. Saffiah stated that her parents were initially upset by her conversion chiefly because she had left the religion that they had raised her in, Catholicism. She opined in words similar to Daniel's that their reaction stemmed from the fact that they were particularly religious themselves: "They didn't have anything against Islam at the time… they were worried about my soul."

Both Daniel and Saffiah locate their parent's concerns with their spiritual health and afterlife, rather than a specific anxiety about Islam. When asked whether she thought her parents would have a similar reaction had she converted to another religion such as Judaism or Buddhism, Saffiah is adamant that their response would have been the same. She attributes this partly to the time of her conversion, which took place in the late 1990s, observing that in those days her parents knew little of Islam and had neither positive nor negative impressions of it. Little in Daniel's nor Saffiah's interviews indicated otherwise. On the other hand, Xander's interview indicated that there were multiple factors that contributed to his parents' fears, though he himself accredits it solely to their faith position.

> No, because my parents, they were practising Roman Catholics. They were strict. More or less. There were some parts of the doctrine that they… ignored. But when I say they were strict, I mean they really, truly thought that if I stopped being Catholic, I'd go to hell.

In the excerpt above, Xander centres his parents' response on the doctrinal teachings of Catholicism, asserting that they would have been just as upset had he converted to a different denomination of Christianity. However, he later adds that they expressed anxiety about what his conversion would mean for his lifestyle and their relationship, giving examples like "drinking beer at the footy" and Christmas celebrations. Through these statements, Xander reveals that despite his earlier characterisation, his parents' doubts about his conversion were also about a change in his cultural practice, which they feared would have an impact on their relationship.

Another cause for reservation offered by converts was that the participant had actively taken on a faith at all, rather than because that faith was one that was different to that of the parents. Stephanie recalls:

> Mum and dad were completely blindsided. They're both atheists and they'd raised me within an atheist belief system, and they just couldn't understand why I'd rejected that. They're not together, they split up ages ago. But they had almost the exact same reaction. I always found that funny. They eventually came around but it was a big shock for them, yeah. I don't think it mattered that I'd become Muslim specifically… I mean I don't know. But I think that if I had become a rigorous Christian they would have been just as upset.

Stephanie remarks that her family's adverse reaction to her conversion was due to their "patronising" attitude "towards all religions, even Christianity." Although she states that her parents were "equal opportunity skeptics," and maintains this narrative throughout the entire interview, she also acknowledges that there were certain elements of Islamic practice that her parents viewed as being culturally inferior. Despite this recognition, she insists that they approached all religions and spiritual orientations with the same critical eye, but states that Islam was simply the most explicitly "different" from the culture that they knew and lived.

There are clear contradictions in Stephanie's account of her parents' attitudes toward Islam. The conflicting messages in her interview and Stephanie's insistence that her parents are not prejudiced against Islam specifically are likely due to her desire to avoid portraying her parents as prejudiced against Islam. The denial of racism apparent in Stephanie's interview mirrors similar denials in other participants' stories, such as Jason's experiences which were examined in subsection 5.3.1. Stephanie is careful to frame her parents' opposition solely as a contention with Islam as a faith position, however her interview reveals that her parents had specific misgivings about Islam that were rooted in cultural anxieties rather than a disagreement with Islamic theology One of the misgivings is apparent in the above quotation from Stephanie, where she states that her parents would have been "just as upset" if she had become a "rigorous Christian." "Rigorous Christian" is juxtaposed against "secular or

nominal Christian" in Stephanie's narrative, which she views would be more acceptable to her parents. Her parents' problem with rigorous Christianity and with Islam is that they view both as being too strict, and in the case of Islam, too visible. This is highlighted in Stephanie's interview in a number of occasions, such as when she describes an incident in which her mother expressed disapproval at Stephanie's refusal to have a sip of champagne to celebrate her brother's wedding:

> She made such a big deal about it, I don't even know why. My brother didn't care, couldn't care less, but she made it out like… I don't even know. 'Why do you have to be so serious, just have some fun, loosen up, relax'… they say, if I'm going to be religious why can't I just be religious inside, why do I have to make it so hard on everyone else, everyone else has to be so careful.

By reflecting on the above exchange, it becomes apparent that it is not Stephanie's internal belief about Islam that her mother finds problematic, but the fact that she is not participating in the Australian ritual of drinking alcohol because her religion prohibits it. Not only is Stephanie's refusal a refusal to participate in Australian culture through alcohol – a theme which will be examined further in section 5.3.3 – but she also fails to be a good secular citizen by refusing to hide her religion.

The notion of Islam as being rigorous, rigid or otherwise onerous is central to its framing as being oppositional to a 'laidback' and relaxed Australian culture that places far less emphasis on rules and structure associated with dogmatic religion. Thus, Muslims commit two transgressions – firstly, for not being Christian, and secondly, for not being secular. Most often, this is demonstrated in the imagining of Islam as a rigid and visible religion – not simply visible by way of 'foreign' clothing, but also because of the importance it places on physical practices rather than only on inward belief. Belinda states that she takes her *ḥijāb* off when she goes to visit her parents because they find it

confronting, though for different reasons. Responses to *ḥijāb* will be discussed in greater depth in section 5.3.4 where I discuss the gendered component of racialisation, but it is pertinent to raise Belinda's experiences here as well because of the very visible and recognisable nature of the *ḥijāb* which immediately indicates to onlookers that the wearer is Muslim. With regards to her mother's disapproval of the *ḥijāb*, Belinda puts this down to the fact that *ḥijāb* is a signifier of the difference between her and her parents religiously but also culturally: "It's just the fact that Islam is so different. She doesn't like that you have to wear *ḥijāb*. It's so visual. She thinks spirituality should be in your heart." Belinda's wearing of *ḥijāb*, a visible indicator of her religion, symbolises to her mother that she does not subscribe to the religious dimensions of whiteness, which is embedded in Christian and secular discourses that promote the concealment of religious identity.

As well as Islam being a visible religion in a secular climate, participants commonly cited that their family's negative response to their conversion was due to the fact that they believed Islam was too "rigid" and had "too many rules." James recounted that his parents had been fine with his conversion until they realised that it was not a matter of belief for him, and that his lifestyle was going to change as well. One of the first incidents where this became apparent to both them was when he declined a roast chicken at a family lunch because it was not *ḥalāl*.

> Normally they'd have like a ham and they didn't this time because they knew I couldn't eat it but they hadn't realised, cos they didn't know about the whole *ḥalāl* meat thing, they just knew pork, ham, bacon, off the table. And so they were really upset about that, well my dad mostly, he cracked it because my mum had cooked it and he thought I was disrespecting her efforts. So every now and then he'll have a grumble about how strict Islam is and how I'm such a fundamentalist and why can't I be like the Muslims he works with who have a beer every now and then. That made it hard too, they see other Muslims

doing *ḥarām* things or whatever, and then they'd come home and berate me, why can't I be moderate? Why do I have to make religion so hard?

James suggests that Islam in particular was a challenge for his parents to accept because they saw Islam as being an especially rigid and "harsh" religion. These characteristics are often ascribed to Islam in Orientalist representations of Islam as "fanatical, intolerant, militant, fundamentalist, misogynist and alien" (Said 1981). The Western stereotype of Islamic fanaticism has included portrayals of Muslims as mindless or dogmatic followers of faith" (Dunn 2001, p. 294). Important to this characterisation is the fact that James's approach to his religion is criticised and compared to the approach of 'moderate' Muslims, in this case referring to Muslims who are more flexible in their interpretation and practice of the religion – in other words, who are perceived to have sufficiently assimilated into secular Australia. Belinda also brought up the issue of 'rigidity' in relation to her own family, including her siblings.

> When it's your family, if we don't participate in it [Christmas], then it just sends the wrong messages about Islam. How are they ever going to convert, like they already think it's so strict, it's so rigid. My sister believes that Islam is the one true religion, in her own words. But there's so many things you have to do, praying, all this stuff, not drinking alcohol, she just sees it as so onerous. So if I'm going to be so rigid with them, then – it's a constant battle, and I think that for a revert, it's a constant *jihād*.

For Belinda, this perceived rigidity was one of the key things that stood as a barrier between her mother and her acceptance of her choice in religion. When asked what specifically her family took issue with, Belinda replied:

> Praying 5 times a day. Mum thinks it's just too rigid. She's like, 'You can talk to them any time, why do you have these rigid – like you have to pray at this time, God doesn't want you to be so rigid.' Fasting, she thinks it's bad for you. These are all things that I used to think too. Not eating pig – like why? 'You've been eating pig your whole life, there's nothing wrong with you, why are you suddenly not eating pig.' Just all of it. It's too rigid. You should be able to do

whatever you want, as long as you love people, as long as you treat people with respect, all of these rigid rules are ridiculous, that's what she thinks.

Here, rigidity speaks to three main concerns. The first is the fear that strict adherence to a religion that is seen to be so far removed from Australian culture necessarily entails distancing themselves from their families, who embody the Australian identity through their whiteness and secularism. This is evident in Belinda's earlier statement that her mother viewed Belinda's conversion to Islam and her choice to wear *ḥijāb* as a rejection of her mother and the way she had chosen to raise her. Secondly, the rigidity and 'onerous' nature of Islam is juxtaposed against what James describes as "laidback Aussie" culture, demonstrated in this example by the secular Muslims who choose to drink alcohol and are applauded for their assimilation into secularism and for making life easier for non-Muslims by not flaunting their religion.

Finally, anxiety about Islam's rigidity reflects a fear that adherents to Islam who are strict in their practice are more likely to become radicalised and violent extremists, and that they will manifest contempt for Australia and Australian culture into an act of violence against the Australian nation. This anxiety will be examined in the following section, which explores how the representation of Muslims as being culturally distant from whiteness posits them as also being security threats to the nation, as their allegiance to the nation is not a guaranteed extension of their whiteness given that Muslims are racialised. White converts to Islam, having in the eyes of some "left" their whiteness, thus also constitute a threat to the Australian nation – in some cases, an even bigger one than non-white Muslims.

In this section, I have argued that participants' experiences highlight that white people's conversion to Islam is seen as transgressive not solely because it is a departure from Christianity, but also because Islam is perceived to be

antithetical to secularism. Through an analysis of the work of prominent sociologists of religion Anidjar, Smith, Randell-Moon and Asad, I demonstrated that it is possible for both contentions with Islam to operate simultaneously, as in an Australian context, Christianity works in tandem with secularism, and perhaps can even be construed as being *manifested in* secularism, as contended by Anidjar. Importantly, both secularism and Christianity are racially coded as white, due to the very nature of Australian nationalism, which exists through the denial and negation of Indigenous sovereignty. In this context, the (white) Australianness of white converts to Islam comes under question, and becomes a source of consternation for non-Muslim family members and friends. In section 5.3.2, I add to the argument I made in the previous paragraph to show how through the construction of Islam as oppositional to secularism, Islam is perceived to be a threat to Australia itself.

5.3.2 Islam as a threat to the Australian nation

In the last section, I drew on qualitative interview data to demonstrate that some participants' non-Muslim relatives viewed Islam to be a rigid religion, contrasted to the Christian-coded secularism that underpins the Australian nation. In this section, I assert that this perceived rigidity adds to pre-existing anxieties that non-Muslims may have about the likelihood of Muslims – in this case of course, white converts specifically – to present a threat to the nation state. In part, this fear emerges from anxieties about Islam which posit it as a particularly violent, militant and fundamentalist religion, and I examine this idea later on in this section. As well, however, it is important to consider the anxieties that people within Western secular democracies may have about the potential threat that religious minorities pose to the nation state more generally. If we take Talal Asad's genealogy of the secular as a starting point, we begin to understand that despite secularism's attempts to characterise itself as a neutral

and normative structure, in much the same way that whiteness does, secularism in fact works to subsume differences of culture, ethnicity and faith within a nation state in order to procure the loyalty of all citizens to the state. Asad points out that nationalism can only be understood through the secular; that it "requires the concept of the secular in order to make sense" (2003, p. 193). Or, as explained in the words of Sherene Razack summarising Asad, "secularism is one way in which the modern state secures its own power and actively produces the citizen whose loyalty is first and foremost to the state" (Razack 2007, p. 7). Muslims who flaunt secular norms by advertising a staunch commitment to their religion, demonstrate that their loyalty is not to the secular state, rendering them as subjects who should be viewed with suspicion as potential threats to the nation. In other words, the further removed Muslims are from secularism in their practice of their religion, the more likely they are to be perceived as radicalised and potential terrorists.

Elaine Laforteza's chapter on the relationship between whiteness and secularism with respect to Muslims in Australia and the Philippines supports this assertion, and she contends that "within normative secular governmentality, Islam is perceived as a religion that threatens national security" (2015, p. 79). Laforteza adds that the threat to the nation is also a threat to whiteness, stating that "While Muslim presence is relatively effaced from dominant portrayals of Australian history, Islam is hyper-visibilised as a contemporary threat that seeks to impinge on whiteness" (2015, p. 91). In other words, as well as Islam posing a threat to the secular nation, it also poses a (highly racialised) threat to the white nation. In their article titled 'Race, Surveillance and Empire,' media theorists Arun Kundnani and Deepa Kumar explain that in the United States, threats to the nation's security are almost always cast via racialized groups; "the Brown terrorist, the Black and Brown

drug dealer and user, and the immigrant who threatens to steal jobs" (Kundnani and Kumar 2015, para 8). To support their argument, Kundnani and Kumar give a detailed overview of the history of state surveillance in the United States, from settler-colonial times to the current era, and demonstrate how the collection of information through that surveillance was often informed by racial oppression. Kundnani and Kumar go on to conclude that "'security' has become one of the primary means through which racism is ideologically reproduced in the 'post-racial,' neoliberal era" (2015, para 8); it is 'politically correct' to express concerns about your nation's security, as long as you don't talk explicitly about race.

In this context, 'newly racialised' white Muslims are potentially even more dangerous than non-white Muslims – as traitors to their race (see section 5.2.3) they are even more susceptible to treason against their nation, as well. For converts, this fear is heightened, as they are perceived to undergo a period of 'fanaticism' that some participants referred to experiencing early on in their Muslim lives, sometimes referred to as "convertitis" within the Muslim community (Roald 2004, p. 282). Roald (2004, p. 283) suggests that such a phase is a universal one amongst converts, and that it represents a desire for absolutism and clear guidelines. As discussed in the introduction (Chapter One), white converts are overrepresented in this characterisation. White converts' quest for absolutism is considered more intimidating than that of Muslims from non-white backgrounds precisely because their newly adopted Muslim identity is viewed as incongruous with the Western values that they were raised with. Conversion and the perceived rigidity of their practice afterwards are seen as an outright rejection of a 'laid back' white secular Australian identity, culture, and way of life, as addressed by the second concern about rigidity discussed at the end of the section 5.3.2. This is then further

extrapolated to conclude that white Muslim converts are more liable to attack Australians because they no longer feel a sense of connection to Australia and the Australian people, or even their family. This perception of white converts and Muslims more generally reflect Ash's description of the two dominant prisms through which the West views Muslims: "the terrorism paradigm and the backwardness paradigm" (Ash 2006, p. 13).

Responses from family members that reflected a concern about the potential of participants to become radicalised were usually expressed through their descriptions of converts' practices as "extreme" or "rigid." Less common were explicit associations between Islam and terrorism or conflicts overseas, although these were sometimes raised in indirect ways. Participants were reluctant to name these incidents outright, perhaps out of a desire to avoid painting their family as Islamophobic or ignorant. For example, when asked about whether he had any concerns about his family's reaction, Paul answered:

> Yeah, probably just because – knowing how little exposure my family and really my whole community and friends had to Islam and Muslims. And this was around the time of September 11. Any view they did have would be negative. And that did come out later as I – the things that happened in their lives were little flags they started to associate negatively. They had formed those negative opinions.

While Paul's discussion of his family's negative perceptions of Islam is rather vague, Belinda openly admitted that her father thought that Muslims were terrorists and that his view had been developed predominantly due to media representations of Islam. Although she discussed her mother's views on her conversion in length, Belinda mentioned her father's attitude only once, saying: "I don't think it's the negativity on the media, for mum. For dad, yeah. Dad still thinks we're all terrorists. He's – I've got a long way to go with Dad." However, neither Paul nor Belinda stated that they felt the image of the 'Muslim terrorist'

was projected onto them by their parents. Instead, their parents' reactions reflected a general association of Muslim with terrorist as a result of Australian media and politicians reinforcing the idea that Muslims are "the current enemy" since the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks (Kabir 2007, p. 1286).

In the interview data collected in this project, comments about Muslims being terrorists were more likely to come from friends, colleagues and co-workers rather than family members. Max describes being bombarded with abusive messages from people who used to be his friends after his conversion, adding that those friends had demonstrated their Islamophobia even prior to his conversion. He recollects one incident that occurred in the car when he and his friends were driving back from a barbeque:

> We were driving back home and this was after I'd read Malcolm X's book and I wanted to become a Muslim then. We drove past the Canberra Islamic Centre. And some people who were in the car with me, I was the only one who wasn't drinking alcohol, they started going off about how there was terrorists in there and this and this. I just remember thinking, oh, jeez. If I convert you know... these are people who I'm really close with and you just drive past a mosque and they're saying this. Looking back on it now that was probably the first time where I was like oh jeez, if people find out that I'm interested in Islam, this could get pretty difficult.

In this excerpt, Max expresses fears that he had about how his friends would react after they found out that he was considering converting, a fear which was realised soon after he said his *shahādah:*

> Pretty much all my friends that I'd grown up with for years, they – I wouldn't say they turned on me but I got lots of messages and stuff saying I was a terrorist. At the time it really caught me off guard a bit. I remember for about two or three days I was just getting messages from this one guy and he was just going on and on and on about me being a terrorist, to the point where he got a permanent marker and was writing stuff on a building site about me. Sending me photos of it. And these were all guys I was friends with since school… When you have a big group of friends and 90% of them start ripping into you and start treating you like you're a terrorist and stuff. That was pretty hard initially.

It is clear from Max's first testimony that many of his peers were already ill-disposed towards Muslims and Islam, and had previously developed the view that Muslim was synonymous with terrorist. As I discussed in section 5.2.3, Muslims living in the West are increasingly being portrayed as the "fifth column," or possible traitors to the nations that they reside in. White Muslim converts are viewed by some as more threatening than non-white Muslims because they have actively chosen to convert to the religion, indicating greater purpose and presence of mind in their attachment to Islam. Their attachment is thus perceived by some to be stronger, and potentially more fundamentalist and dangerous, than non-white Western Muslims.

While most participants expressed that they felt these views were largely unwarranted, Tasneem offered an alternative perspective by stating that non-Muslim Australians had a "healthy scepticism" towards converts. Speaking about the perception of white converts in Australia, she states:

> If they had status in the community, then they're the "others". Especially if they are, you know the Rabeas [Hutchinson, from Jihad Sheilas]… the Muslim reverts who, David Hicks, John whatever his name was in the US - you know the Shoe Bomber. People who were led astray by other Muslims. There's a healthy scepticism and a certain amount of fear amongst the Australian community towards Muslim reverts. And they sort of don't really know how to place us. Are you a wacko? Are you brainwashed? Are you part of another power, fifth column type of stuff. They have no really have no idea how to deal with you.

In the above excerpt, Tasneem suggests that the fear that non-Muslim Australians have about Muslim converts is not completely unfounded, as there are examples within the white Muslim convert community in Australia and other Western countries such as Britain and the United States to support concerns about converts becoming radicalised. In the quotation, Tasneem highlights that whiteness plays a role in the confusion that white Muslim converts create for non-Muslim Australians who are unsure about how to

"place" or "deal with" them. Tasneem's description implies that in the absence of understanding about why a white Australian would "leave" their whiteness and Australianness for Islam, non-Muslims may revert to negative assumptions about white converts as being mentally unstable, mentally ill or brainwashed. This suggests that stereotypes about Muslim converts that are propagated through the news media as being easily radicalised due to a mental deficiency (the Daily Mail UK 2016, the Telegraph 2016, Time Magazine 2016) are operating effectively in the Australian national imaginary.

5.3.3 Islam as culturally foreign

Many of the anxieties expressed by friends, family members and colleagues of the converts interviewed centred on the fact that Islam was culturally foreign to them, sometimes coupled with the inference that as well as being foreign, Islam was also inferior to Australian culture. Indeed, the perception of Islam as 'foreign' (and everything that attaches to that label) informs many of the exchanges already documented and analysed in previous sections of this chapter. Interactions with family members in particular indicated that part of their discomfort about the respective participant's conversion was related to the idea that white Muslim converts would become distant from them as a result of them distancing themselves from – and sometimes, outright rejecting - the lifestyle that they had been raised in. Interestingly, in these exchanges with family members Islam is often described by relatives of the participant as being a culture, or cultural, while whiteness is very rarely named – instead, it is evoked through the language of individual or familial expectations and hopes, or sometimes Australia generally, highlighting the normative nature of whiteness and its role in defining the Australian nation. In these situations, the racialisation of Islam occurs through far more subtle and indirect ways that

One example of the idea that Islam is particularly problematic for some people because of its perceived cultural distance from the Australian way of life is found in Belinda's interactions with her mother. Belinda explains that mother's response to her conversion and particularly her adoption of the *ḥijāb* demonstrated that her mother feels like her adoption of Islam is not just a rejection of her Christian religion, but of her culture and ultimately of her – however, Belinda's mother does not herself use culture except when talking about Islam:

> But she says it's because – she feels like it's a stab in her heart. Mum and dad are always like, "We've given you such a good education and we've paid for you to do things like – and you've thrown this in our face." It's a rejection, and she said it's a rejection of how I've been brought up, and how I've been brought up Christian. But Mum just felt like I was rejecting her. That was the biggest thing… It's just a rejection. I've taken what I've been brought up, and I've thrown it all in their face. Cos she thinks it's cultural. She thinks *ḥijāb* is cultural. She thinks I've joined this other culture. She said to me before, "Don't go and adopt a Muslim family just cos we're Christian." So she just is scared of the Other. It's just scary.

It is clear from Belinda's interview that her mother did not take issue with the *ḥijāb* just because it was a visible marker of religion, but that it represented a religion that to her seemed to be irreconcilable with her own culture – explaining why she feared her daughter was joining another, foreign culture. While the 'visibility' aspect of Islam was almost entirely restricted to female experiences, due to Muslim women being far more likely to wear visual markers of Muslim identity than men, the notion of Islam as being foreign, unfamiliar and different was a common one, raised by male and female participants alike. In the words of Jason, Islam was "the final frontier" for his family and many of his friends. He explains that they knew very little about Islam except what they heard on television, and that this was partly due to their geographical location:

I can't blame them, though. How can I blame what I was? Back then, the Shire was even whiter than it is now, and by white I mean 100% Anglo, basically, very few Italians or Greeks out that way either. Let alone Muslims. If there were, we didn't know them. So when I told my parents I'd become Muslim, they were like – "Muzzo-what?!" *laughs* I shouldn't laugh, it's funny now but at the time it was, yeah it was a pretty traumatic period for me. I was still at uni and my parents basically kicked me out. They didn't throw me out but they put me into a position where I had to leave.

When asked what he meant by that, Jason explains:

They didn't tell me I had to leave but they basically said if I was living under their roof, their house their rules basically, this is Australia, blah blah blah. I had to pretend I wasn't Muslim. If I didn't eat their food or drink with them they would make a big deal about it. I wasn't allowed to pray in the house. I couldn't keep any of my books, like the Qur'an and some other books I was studying at the time in the house, I kept them in my car. It got to the point where I was avoiding being at home anyway so basically I figured I may as well move out.

Jason uses a discourse of absence about Muslims in the Sutherland Shire to explain his parents' antipathy towards Islam, although census data shows that 1648 residents or 0.8% of the total population of the Sutherland Shire chose "Islam" on the census form in 2011. Jason suggests these elements of practice – prayer, food, religious books, and alcohol – were rejected by his parents precisely because they found the foreignness confronting, unfamiliar and even threatening. By framing their objection to his Islamic practice in reference to the fact that they lived in Australia, Jason's parents asserted that the practice of Islam has no place in Australian cultural life. Through statements such as these, Islam is characterised not as a benign foreign culture that can be assimilated into Australia under the auspice of tolerant multiculturalism, but as one whose difference is both problematic and potentially dangerous.

The threat that Islam and Muslims are perceived to present "becomes evident along the lines of new racist discourse where 'Islam' and 'Muslims' are seen to be incompatible with the dominant or perceived overriding culture and its

heritage: that is, being 'British' and being 'us'" (Allen 2007, p. 130). While sociologist Chris Allen is writing from a British context, the same can be said of Australia, where Islam is discursively framed as culturally disparate from Australianness and implicitly, whiteness. This is apparent also in interactions that participants described where they were expected to be exceptionally familiar with or involved in events taking place overseas, most often in the form of conflicts in the Middle East. Ben expresses frustration at the idea that as a Muslim he is automatically connected to overseas events, stating: "Somehow, amazingly, I'm supposed to know everything that happens in the Middle East, like being Muslim gives you a magic 8 ball into that!" Saffiah remarks that at her workplace she has become the "go-to girl" for "anything involving Muslims anywhere in the world," and hesitatingly submits that she finds the assumption racist: "Not that they intend to, you understand, but it's an assumption they have. I can't get rid of it now." Tasneem recounts that while she is very rarely on the end of interpersonal racism, which she attributes to her confidence, assertiveness, and upper class Australian accent, she has encountered institutional racism which presupposes that her allegiance is overseas rather than in Australia. Speaking about her attempts to set up Islamic schools in Sydney, she says:

> The biggest issues were all the battles that I had with setting up schools. The first school, we had to move the school nine times. [The Council member] didn't want to meet with me, he didn't want to see me, he didn't want to be seen with me. He said, I respect what you're trying to do but don't do it here. People think you're building Palestinian bombs. It was always tied to something that happened overseas.

The above examples offer an insight into how Muslims are perceived to have a unique connection to other countries and far off lands. The inverse was also apparent in the interview data - participants cited a number of specific cultural elements that they felt were viewed by family and friends to be in distinct

contrast to the Australian way of life, and that they felt contributed to their overall impression of Islam as a foreign culture. In a number of diverse settings, which include interactions with family as well as colleagues and friends, alcohol, the beach, food, clothing and events such as Christmas all become highly contested and culturally inscribed, and in the context of conversion to Islam come to be viewed as representative of what it means to be Australian. These elements of Australian culture were never expressed in terms of whiteness or race. Instead, I argue that these elements become racialised as white vis-a-vis their positioning as normative and naturalised aspects of Australianness, an identity which is underpinned by whiteness.

Drinking culture and alcohol was brought up in almost every interview, with male converts were far more likely to nominate it as a barrier to their working and social lives. The primacy of drinking in Australian culture was raised by a number of participants; as Max succinctly expressed it: "Finish work, you have a beer. Go to a birthday party, you have a beer. Everything is 'have a beer.' You go play cricket or something, have a beer. It's like have a beer is like – what are we – people say you drink to celebrate but you celebrate 3-4 times a week. What are you celebrating?" Like Max, Paul described alcohol as being fundamental and indeed "sacred" to the Australian way of life, and one that Paul felt was a negative aspect of Australian culture that went unchallenged:

> And drinking culture as well. Like if you were to start going to pubs and really asking someone, 'why are you drinking?' They'd just go along with it you know. So I guess there's things like that that I question and I associate with my culture and my heritage in Australia, that they just go unquestioned. They're just part of the fabric of who we are. But some of them are really silly, like this binge drinking culture that goes, permeates right into adulthood. It's stupid, it's really stupid. But it won't change. It's so sacred to the Australian psyche. A bit of that larrikinism and that – oh we'll all go and get drunk. And some of it needs to be questioned.

For some participants, the decision to quit alcohol was a difficult one precisely because they knew that it would present a challenge for their existing lifestyles. Florian articulated his hesitation to stop drinking alcohol as a result of his intellectual conversion to Islam, which meant that his practice of it was taken up in stages. When asked about any concerns he had about converting, Florian replied, "Yeah, I mean frankly I was concerned about alcohol. Not so much about pork, because pork I didn't really enjoy, but I enjoyed alcohol so... yes, that was an issue. It took me a while to stop." Florian describes the change in his social life after he stopped drinking alcohol as an organic one. While he states that it "complicated" his social life and lifestyle, which up until that point had not undergone significant changes, he took it in stride:

> At first I was still drinking alcohol so there wasn't too many, too much changes… So I was pretty much going to the same places and doing the same things. And so when I stopped drinking alcohol and started eating *ḥalāl* meat, suddenly things became more complicated. And then you realise that your lifestyle is just different you know. When the lifestyle is too different you just sort of drift away from friends. Without a big clash, it was just life... So I could say that now from that time I don't have too much friends.

Florian notes that growing up in France, alcohol was a large part of the national culture. Referring to one exchange he had with a waiter in a restaurant where the waiter made jokes about the fact that Florian was not drinking, he adds that in many settings drinking alcohol was a requirement, and the abstention from it was liable to see you mocked and your masculinity questioned. Comments from other participants expressed that they felt the same was true for them in Australia. Max stated that he had never liked drinking alcohol, and that he had been teased for it a lot during high school, laughingly adding that "it was probably good preparation for becoming Muslim." While Max found it easy to resist social pressure to drink, other participants found it had a negative impact on their lives. Speaking of his job

in the corporate sphere, Xander states that his "end to drinking basically signalled the end of [his] career":

> It sounds a bit melodramatic but if you've ever seen the corporate world, you'll know what I mean. I hate it, it's vicious. I never liked alcohol too much to begin with but at least I could have a sip of wine or nurse a beer for the whole evening if I had to. Obviously before I became Muslim. But now, it's like I've been edged out of everything. I'm not saying it's just the drinking because there's other things too but if you don't join in, go out for drinks Friday night – you murder your career, you do.

From Xander's interview, it is clear that he feels that alcohol is a fundamental part of work culture because of the corporate sphere's reliance on (masculine-centric) mateship to build cultural capital, which Xander expresses through references to his workplace as being a "boys club." Drinking alcohol in such a space becomes a performance of masculinity as well as of whiteness through Australianness, and Xander's refusal to drink alcohol calls into question his right to be present in the gendered and raced club of the corporate world. In the past Xander was able to "integrate with alcohol" – what Fry calls a "protective strategy" that "implies infrequent drinkers find it easier to integrate within the drinking culture, rather than opposing the dominant norm. Being seen to be involved has implications for conforming to group norms where acceptance is implicit" (2010, p. 1289). While previously Xander was able to engage in practices that rendered invisible the fact that he did not drink much, his conversion to Islam and decision to halt drinking entirely for religious reasons meant he could no longer use those measures to blend in. His inability to accrue cultural capital by drinking thus limited his potential to fit into his workplace and ultimately progress his career.

Fatima also expressed frustration at the role that alcohol played in the social life of her workplace. Speaking of her experiences after conversion, she states:

I knew that there were certain things that I would not be doing. Like drinking alcohol, I think drinking alcohol is actually a big thing because in Australia it is very much a part of social life. I get invited all the time to go to the pub with my workmates. I come up with excuses every week. Between the beginning of my conversion and now, it has not really changed because at the beginning I think I sort of realised just how much these un-Islamic practices are part of Australian culture.

Fatima feels the need to make excuses to colleagues because she feels that they would not understand her reasons, even though they know she is Muslim because she wears the *ḥijāb*. Many participants expressed a similar viewpoint, stating that non-Muslims often found it impossible to believe that someone would voluntarily choose to not drink alcohol. Speaking about her relatives, Penny contends that "it almost offends them, like how can you reject *my* culture?" Xander relates a similar reaction from his co-workers, stating, "I could tell them that I trained poodles to pole dance and their jaws would hit the floor slower than they do when they find out I don't drink. Most of the time they don't believe me and kind of, they try to, like, egg me on. And when I don't budge they get almost, indignant." In these interactions, both Xander and Penny suggest that the refusal to drink alcohol is viewed by some non-Muslims as contempt for the Australian culture. In other cases, the idea that someone would not drink alcohol or that alcohol would not be present in a social situation was mostly cause for confusion. Edward describes a conversation with his father just before he got married, in which Edward explained that they were not going to have any alcohol at the wedding:

So for example, he was insistent that we would have alcohol at our wedding *laughs*. And trying to explain to him that that's definitely a no-no, that we couldn't have alcohol at the wedding. "Oh, could we have a little room at the back where we could go and have alcohol." "No, no, we're not having alcohol at the wedding." And I think, a lot of it is denial and when it comes to a point where you actually have to deal with it, it's not knowing how to deal with that.

In Edward's explanation of his father's response, he suggests that it was mostly motivated by denial about Edward's conversion, and what it meant in terms of practical lifestyle changes. This is supported by a comment he makes earlier in the interview, where he states that his father was very supportive of Edward's conversion but that: "again, I'm sensing now that a period of time has passed, I'm sensing now that he's realised what the full implications are, that there certainly are – he has some problems with it." When asked to clarify what these problems were, Edward stated that one of the problems his father had with his conversion was that it did not fit his expectations of what his son's life would look like, expectations that were culturally-informed and mediated. The cultural differences between Islam and Australian whiteness, symbolised through such things as alcohol, proves to be a stumbling block for parents striving to understand their children's decision to convert to Islam. The decision to forego what is perceived to be an important element of Australian culture for the sake of one's religion is seen to be contrary to the construction of 'Australianness' as laidback and secular.

Beach culture was also raised by participants as an example of 'Australianness' that was perceived by some non-Muslims as a potential barrier for Muslims integrating into Australian culture. Although it was only mentioned by a small number of participants, the beach is a meaningful concept to consider given the centrality of the beach to Australian mythology. There is a large body of literature that documents how the beach is understood to be a significant aspect of the way that Australians understand themselves (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987, Johns 2008, Moreton-Robinson & Nicoll 2006) and has "long been accepted as a crucial arena for the performance of Australian national identity" (Lems et al 2016). Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll point to the pervasive presence of the beach in Australian books, TV shows, films and even music clips to state that,

"The beach has maintained a persistent status as icon, site of memory and backdrop for teenage rites of passage in Australian culture." In their 1987 book, 'Myths of OZ: Reading Australian Popular Culture,' Australian scholars John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner devote an entire chapter to deconstructing what the beach means to Australians, claiming for many Australians, the beach acts as the symbolic extension of the mythology of Australia as a country that is "classless, matey, basic, natural" (1987, p. 58). Fiske, Hodge and Turner focus on key figures like the Australian lifesaver and the Australian surfer – often represented as bronzed, strong and overwhelmingly male – as demonstrative of an Australian mythos that conceptualises the beach as the meeting point of all that Australia is and can be, as the site of the "urban and natural, civilized and primitive, spiritual and physical, culture and nature" (1987, p. 54).

Significantly, 'the beach' as it stands in Australia's national imaginary is also decidedly racialised. The beach was the first site of contact between Indigenous peoples and white colonisers, and where the first flag of Great Britain was placed in 1788 in Sydney Cove after claiming *terra nullius* – 'the land belongs to no one.' The beach was also the site of the infamous Cronulla Riots in Sydney in December 2005, in which 5000 white Australians converged in the southern Sydney suburb of Cronulla to protest the presence of young Lebanese (predominantly Muslim) men on 'their' beach, leading to violent riots, vandalism and attacks on anyone who looked 'non-white'. Some beaches do not even need to be in Australia for it to feature prominently in the Australian national imaginary. The Gallipoli Campaign of World War One - one of the defining moments for securing white Australian nationhood in Australia's history - was fought and lost by Australian and New Zealander soldiers against armies of the Muslim Ottoman Empire on a beach in Turkey far away from

Australian shores, but is still an integral part of Australia's national identity. Although Gallipoli was an undeniable defeat, it is often through that campaign on a Turkish beach that the figure of the courageous, matey, white (and male) ANZAC soldier is constructed and reified as the quintessential Australian hero. As Suvendrini Perera poignantly points out, in stark contrast to romanticised notions of the beach held by those inside and outside of Australia:

> …in Australia the beach is a site that cannot be sequestered from the political life of the state. It encompasses the full weight of politico-historical experience as an arena where vital contests for power, possession, and sovereignty are staged. This beach is both the original scene of invasion and the ultimate border, a site of ongoing racial demarcation and exclusion, as of endless vigilance and fear (2009, p. 138).

Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll contend that the significance of the beach in Australian history and culture is underscored by its construction as a white possession (2006). In their article 'We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches: Protesting Cultures of White Possession,' they posit that although the idea that the beach is a collectively-owned space dominates the Australian mythos, in reality the beach operates as a site of patriarchal white possession that is founded on Indigenous dispossession and "stages the performance and reproduction of the hierarchy of gendered and raced identities in Australia" (2006, p. 151). I have summarised Moreton-Robinson's work on the white possessive logic of Australian nationhood in section 2.4 of this thesis, but it is useful to reiterate Moreton-Robinson's key thesis that Australia is constructed by white people as a white possession through the continual dispossession of Indigenous land from Indigenous peoples, and immigration policies that privilege whiteness. For Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, the beach is one of the prominent sites in which the logic of white possession is operationalised, as they illustrate through their analysis of the Cronulla Riots. Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll draw upon examples from the riots to highlight that far from an

anomaly, the riots were symbolic of a racialisation of space that has been occurring in Australia since invasion, crudely illustrated by the large "100% Aussie Pride" sign drawn into the sand on the beach for the camera crews in the helicopters circling above.

The idea that the beach is constructed through the possessive logic of white racial structures poses salient questions for white converts who at one time had proprietary ownership over the beach, before their entry into a religion racialised as non-white. When queried about the major challenges she faced with her family as a white convert, Belinda immediately identified the beach:

> So when you first convert, you don't feel like you fit in with your family and your friends anymore, because you're a little bit different from them. It could be anything. It could be because you pray five times a day, it could be because you want to dress more modestly, you don't want to go to the beach – like my family is a massive beach family, we lived at the beach. Bodysurfing was my favourite thing to do, dad taught us when we were five. It's such a part of the Aussie culture and it was for me. Or it could be that you no longer want to drink, or you just don't want to have pork, or it could be anything.

Belinda highlights the centrality of the beach to 'Aussie culture,' which she suggests is as important to Australian culture as alcohol or pork. When asked to clarify, Belinda implies that it is not the beach itself that is the problem, but the ways in which people use the beach and the clothes that are viewed as acceptable beach attire in Australian culture:

> The beach – the beach is a big problem. Big, big problem. I don't even want to go home now, Mum's still like, why don't you wear your shorts? It was such a drama when I started wearing tracksuit pants to hockey. She was so angry. Beach is just – and I think that's one reason why I've struggled with ḥijāb with my parents. Because it's such a part of our culture. We go on family holidays to the beach all the time. We're going to Tasmania so I'm praying it's going to be cold. It's ridiculous. Whereas if I could just wear my burqini and they would have no problem with it. But they'd die.

In this quotation, Belinda reveals that she owns a burqini, a swimsuit designed with Muslim women in mind that covers up to the hands and feet, with an attached hood to cover one's hair. However, she does not feel comfortable to wear it at the beach around her family, because of their antipathy towards the *ḥijāb* and other visible aspects of Islam. A similar statement was made by Stephanie, who commented that "the beach is not for people like us… I go with my kids sometimes but, I'm not, it's not comfortable for us." For Stephanie, going to the beach was something that she did for her children to enjoy, but that she did not get any pleasure out of, adding later that "it's awkward, the stares you get… there are some beaches that are okay 'cause a lot of Muslims go there and others who don't mind going full clothed, so we tend to stick to those beaches even though they're further, we don't go to the Aussie beaches anymore." Here, Stephanie suggests that beaches in Sydney are informally segregated and that there are certain expectations of dress that attach to the 'Aussie' beach which nominate a specific cultural norm that she feels cannot be accommodated by Islam. The racial demarcation of beaches occurs through 'cultural' lines – of what is and what isn't appropriately 'Aussie' attire, which in the contemporary Australian imaginary is the two-piece bikini for women.

Writing about the presence of the burqini on the Australian beach, Susie Khamis points out that the unease about the perceived dichotomy between the bikini and *ḥijāb* was highlighted in conversations around the Cronulla riots, where it was suggested that the 'un-Australian' behaviour of Lebanese Muslim men towards 'Aussie' white women was due to the men's opinions on modesty and clothing (2010, p. 383). Through such discursive constructions, she argues, 'Islam' and 'Australian' are pitted against one another, with their dichotomous relationship fully visible on the site of the beach. Khamis posits that this line of thinking signals that:

…a clash exists in the semiotic space between the bikini and the veil: where the former bespeaks a liberal, open-minded, and progressive Australia, the later hints at a regressive, inflexible, and sexist Islam. Construed thus, the difference is between the blithe hedonism of the modern beach setting, and the buttoned-up mores of a medieval theocracy (2010, p. 383).

Khamis recognises the challenges for Muslims within Australian beach culture, but unlike Belinda she is optimistic about opportunities for Muslims to participate in the beach, heavily promoting the potential of the burqini to advancing intercultural dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia. In contrast to Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, Khamis contends that the beach can be an inclusive space, stating that the burqini "shows just how malleable the concept of an 'Australian way of life' is" (2010, p. 386) and "makes the Australian beach a far more inclusive, accommodating space" (2010, p. 387). While Khamis's optimism is contagious, her lack of engagement with the scholarship purporting the Australian beach as a racialised space leaves it unclear whether or not the burqini can help to subvert or challenge the dominant racial structures of the beach, or whether the additional dialogue comes about through greater participation of Muslim women in the beach.

As well as clothing, the activities that the beach was used for was raised by participants as examples of ways in which the beach could be hostile for Muslims. Xander recalled an incident where he and his friends were abused by an older woman at the beach:

> We were having a BBQ and that's what they're there for, yeah? And there were a big group of us maybe around… 15 families and we all have kids, mostly young little kids. And so we were a big group, our kids were running around playing, screaming, one of my friends kid stacked it near this group of old Aussie women and one of them just lost it at us, it was kind of funny actually cos we were so big and loud we just ignored her but yeah, I forgot about that actually.

Xander's story is reminiscent of some of the complaints of Cronulla residents who expressed ire at the way that young Lebanese men used the beach, which they felt was too noisy, boisterous and active. Greg Noble suggests that this perceived breach of multicultural manners was one of the key catalysts for the Cronulla riots (2009). Lebanese young men were viewed as having broken Cronulla's Aussie beach etiquette by arriving in large groups, being loud and demonstrative, especially to women, playing soccer on the sand rather than sunbaking, and wearing jeans or football shorts rather than board shorts. Noble argues that these behaviours were racialised by Cronulla residents, which emanated from a lack of understanding of cultural difference: "If our daily lives are punctuated by cultural differences which we don't understand, then the confluence of moral order and an ethnic imaginary becomes compelling" (Noble 2009, p. 15). Arguably, cultural differences in how people use the beach – whether it is having large barbecues with over sixty people or quietly sunbathing by yourself – become readily racialised because the space of the beach itself is racialised to begin with and constructed as a white possession. Racialised groups such as Muslims are expected to conform to 'Australian' modes of beach culture, or they are excluded.

This section focused on two elements of Australian culture, alcohol and the beach, to highlight that Islam is often racialised through more subtle and indirect references to 'Australian culture'. Although race may not be explicitly evoked in such contexts, the concept of 'Australianness' operates as a metonym for white. I chose to examine this concept through alcohol and beach culture partly because of their prevalence in the stories of white Muslim converts, but also because they both feature prominently in the Australian national imaginary. However, while there is a significant amount of literature about the racial inflection of beach culture in Australia, as highlighted earlier in this

section, there is a noticeable absence of literature on the racialised aspects of alcohol, which is curious given how often it was mentioned by participants of this project. This thesis is ill-equipped to address the gap in the scholarship; however, it does indicate a potential area for further research.

5.3.4 Islam as oppressive to women

One of the key tropes used to advance the idea that Islam and Muslims are culturally deviant from the space of whiteness and Australianness is that of Islamic misogyny. The fear of Muslim men's oppression of Muslim women was introduced in a number of interviews as being a key concern for non-Muslim families of converts. While the concern for Muslim women is expressed towards non-white women as well, often via colonial and neo-colonial feminist narratives (Ho 2007), white convert women are viewed with particular horror because it is felt that they should "know better" due to the liberties and superior intellect afforded to them by their whiteness. This is in contrast to non-white Muslim women who are looked at with pity and condescension for not knowing any better beyond their perceived cultural indoctrination. It is not surprising then that female participants in particular raised this as being one of the prime anxieties for their families, and stated that many of their relatives expressed horror and concern about their conversion to a religion that they believed denied women rights. As Stephanie explains:

> There is nothing that I could have done that would have made my feminist, hippy parents, my mother especially, more worried and, and, *scared*… for me than becoming Muslim. Nothing. If I became a prostitute, or a drug addict, they would have been far more supportive of any of those things than they were of me being Muslim. Being Muslim was anathema to them. I told them that I had planned to convert about four, five months before I actually took the plunge, and they spent most of that time trying to convince me out of it.

When asked how exactly her parents tried to persuade her not to convert, Stephanie responds:

> They'd say things like, don't you know how they treat their women? You have so much potential, do you really want to spend the rest of your life married to a man who has three other wives, popping out babies for him, never leaving the house, not working, wearing a tent outside, etcetera. Just… ridiculous things. Didn't you hear about the Lebanese gang rapes last year? That's what they're like, they have no respect for women. I'm making them sound really hateful and racist but they're not, not really, they were just really scared for me. All they knew about Islam was from Not Without My Daughter and the Princess books about the Saudi princesses. This was back in the early 2000s, and they were, yeah they were just scared.

This excerpt from Stephanie captures many of the concerns and messages raised by other female participants. Stephanie is reluctant to name her parents' perceptions as racist, an issue that I have drawn attention to earlier in this thesis in chapter it is clear from her words that they, like the relatives of other participants, feared that their daughter would be oppressed and subjugated as a Muslim. Female participants highlighted that attitudes towards women in Islam were a source of anxiety and fear for some of their relatives and friends. Riley recounted that her parents were convinced that she had been "brainwashed" by a man who would force her to wear a face veil and stop her education: "Nothing could be further from the truth. I actually knew very few Muslim men, and none of the ones I did know were very religious. I was kind of offended to be honest, that my parents thought I would relinquish my feminist principles so easily." Imogen, who initially converted to marry her Muslim boyfriend, had a similar experience when she told her mother that she was planning to become Muslim:

> When my husband and I split up she was so relieved, she thought she would get her daughter back. Even though I never left, I hadn't changed. So imagine how distraught she was when not only did I not give up the religion, I even started wearing *ḥijāb*. It's been 7 years now since I converted and she's only just

started to come around. But she's still not happy, not by a long shot. She's a big feminist and she took my conversion as a slap in the face.

Through the characterisation of Islam and inherently misogynistic, Islamophobia is operationalised through a gendered construction of Muslims and Islamic practices – of Muslim men as the oppressors of Muslim women, who must be 'saved'. Islamophobic attitudes and white anxieties about cultural difference and cohesion are thus reframed as a concern for women's rights, which ironically serve to themselves contribute to a paternalistic and patriarchal desire to protect and save women. Christina Ho (2007, p. 292) criticises the 'colonial feminist' attitudes implicit in the victim narratives perpetuated about Muslim women in nationalist discourses that seek to 'save brown women from brown men' (2007, p. 294), and use women's rights as a justification for conceptualising Islam as culturally inferior. Embedded in such nationalist discourses is the notion that Australia is a gender-equal society in which Islamic beliefs and attitudes do not belong, thereby situating Islam as outside of and indeed oppositional to Australian culture. Far from being unique to Australia, these attitudes are rife throughout the West: Sonya Fernandez states that what she terms the "savages-victims-saviours prism" (2009, p. 272) and Sherene Razack describes as the "eternal triangle between the imperilled Muslim woman, the dangerous Muslim man and the civilized European" (2007, p. 5) has been enacted in Islamophobia since the times of the Crusades. Fernandez argues that "The crusade to save Muslim women from Muslim men obscures the racist binaries that inform polemics about the oppression of Muslim women, and instead plays on some inherent sense of equality and freedom that is perceived as the sole preserve of the West and the (sufficiently) westernized" (2009, p. 271). White women who choose to convert to Islam thus need to be saved from a decision that takes them out of the space of West

imbued with equality and freedom, and into the cultural space of Islam, characterised by the oppression of women.

The construction of Islam as an exceptionally patriarchal and misogynistic culture is illustrated by the national level findings of the Challenging Racism project (Dunn et. al. 2004), and demonstrates that racialisation is experienced in gendered ways (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993, p. 125). Respondents were asked about their level of concern for a family member who chose to marry a Muslim, a Jew, an Aboriginal person, an Asian person, a Christian, a British person and an Italian person - the first four groups used as examples of 'out-groups.' Half of the participants stated that they would be concerned about a family member marrying a Muslim, almost twice as many as reported concern for the next highest group, Aboriginal people at 28.9% (2004, p. 415). In another article, Dunn et. al. suggests that the disparity "suggests that the stereotype of Islamic misogyny is an important component of the racialisation of Islam in Australia" (2007, p. 574), due to the implication that those who expressed concern were worried about the treatment that a female family member would suffer at the hands of her Muslim husband. Dunn et al note that this stereotype exists in Europe as well as Australia, and extends to 'ethnic Others' in general. This impression of Islamic misogyny is remarkably evident in the narratives of Riley, Stephanie and Imogen earlier in this section, where they describe the fear that their parents – often mothers – expressed about how they would be treated by their Muslim husbands or boyfriends.

Crucial to this characterisation of Islam as inherently misogynistic is a fascination with Muslim women's clothing, and in particular head coverings such as the *ḥijāb* and *niqāb*. Indeed, these forms of dress represent "a static colonial image that symbolizes Western superiority over Eastern backwardness" (Razack 2008, p. 120). The perception that the *ḥijāb* is a symbol

of female oppression and Muslim patriarchy was present in a number of interviews with female converts. For some participants, the trigger for their parents' disapproval or concern was not their conversion itself, but their decision to wear the *ḥijāb*. In Imogen's interview, she explains that she felt her conversion was not "real" to her parents until she started wearing the *ḥijāb* three years after her conversion. Prior to that decision, Imogen observes, her parents had purported to be fine with her conversion, and she herself had not noticed any compelling change in their behaviour towards her. After she stared wearing the *ḥijāb* on a regular basis, however, her parents began to talk to her about current affairs and world news as it related to Muslims overseas, particularly in relation to women. In her interview, Imogen describes their steadily increasing desire to discuss issues such as forced *ḥijāb*, forced marriage, child marriages and female genital mutilation in the Muslim world, which she interpreted as an implicit condemnation of Islam's treatment of women. Imogen clarifies that their disapproval about her wearing of *ḥijāb* was never explicitly stated, nor did they ever outright condemn Islam as being a religion that oppressed women. Nevertheless, she was able to gauge their feelings about her wearing of *ḥijāb* based on the aforementioned discussions, as well as other subtle behavioural cues such as sighing or shaking their heads when she reached for or adjusting her *ḥijāb* when they were about to leave the house. Their change in behaviour, Imogen suggests, is indicative of their perception that the *ḥijāb* is representative of a general strain of misogyny within Islam.

Other female participants described similar experiences, where the opposition was not explicitly stated but rather apparent in their parents' non-verbal attitudes towards them. In relation to her adoption of the *ḥijāb*, Katherine states: "My dad was really, really, really opposed to it. And me and my dad have always been really close, and it was the first time in my life that I did something

that upset my dad and made him disappointed in me. And that was really hard. Of my close friends – they didn't really care, non-Muslims they didn't really care, but my dad really, really did care." When asked why the *ḥijāb* specifically was so difficult for her dad to accept, Katherine attributes it to its stark visibility as an identifier of her religion:

> It changes so dramatically how you look. For me it was nothing. You put it on and everything you see is exactly the same. Nothing has changed for you. It's everyone who's looking at you, you look so dramatically different. Especially as someone who grew up on the Northern Beaches who grew up wearing short shorts and a bikini and that kind of thing.

The *ḥijāb* is not simply another piece of clothing in this scenario, it is a racialised marker of difference in their worlds, which are in this quote delineated both geographically (Northern Beaches) and culturally (reference to dress). The reference to the Northern Beaches is particularly relevant in this context, given that it is an area of Sydney described by the participant as "so completely white, like the whitest place in the world": "short shorts and bikinis" are a form of attire associated with this whiteness. The exclusion of *ḥijāb* from this cultural space is further emphasised in her interview when Katherine describes the lengths that the few Muslims who lived on the Northern Beaches would go to in order to be accepted into that space: "I knew one Muslim girl who would leave school wearing a headscarf, take it off, roll up her skirt so it was the shortest skirt in the place, go to every party and that kind of thing." She adds that these actions reaffirmed the "oppressiveness" of the *ḥijāb* to their peers: "And that kind of confirmed to the people on the Northern Beaches, oh look how oppressive it is, she has to hide from her family that she acts like we do, and that kind of thing."

Belinda's analysis of her situation with her parents is similar to that of Katherine's. She explains that while she wears *ḥijāb* everywhere else, she has yet

to wear her *ḥijāb* in front of her parents, because she knows it would upset them. Part of her reasoning for her decision is discussed in section 5.3.1, where Belinda explains that the *ḥijāb* represents a visual marker of difference to her parents' culture. She further identifies that her mother felt that *ḥijāb* was something oppressive: "She thinks it's really cultural and obviously degrading. I did too. People feel sorry for us. I hate that. I hate it. That's my ego I think, because I think that people think I'm degraded or whatever."

The interviews with Belinda, Imogen and Katherine indicate that nonconformity to 'normal' Australian modes of dress constitutes the wearer of the *ḥijāb* as a non-white, racialised Other. This is articulated by Fatima in her interview as well, where she remarks that her rejection of particular Australian cultural traits, such as dress, alcohol, and food meant that others saw her as less white than she was previously:

> When I put on the *ḥijāb* I was worried about strangers giving me dirty looks and strangers saying stuff to me. But in some cases it was people I already knew who gave me more trouble. For the people who knew I was going to convert to Islam, that was probably the biggest thing. For the people who didn't know or they weren't aware, when I put on the *ḥijāb* that was a big thing as well. That was also seen as a move away from being white. When you think about it, I think I was to a large extent judged on more superficial things like how I dressed, what I do or what I don't do. I was judged on those things.

Like Belinda, Katherine and Imogen, Fatima specified that she felt that people who knew her "judged" her closeness with whiteness through more visual and easily perceptible elements of her changed lifestyle. Fatima indicates that she believes there is a patronising element to their judgement, in that they feel that as a white person she should have known better. She stated that this paternalism is one end of a spectrum which culminates in white converts being viewed as traitors to their race:

And the thing is that we do have solidarity with them in that we are from the same race, whereas it is so easy, just what the workings of racism are like, it's so easy for them to dismiss another race and dismiss another culture and dismiss the religion along with it, but when someone of your own race comes into that religion, it kind of throws things off balance for them. And I think to a large extent there is the expectation that we should know better and we're not like them and when you extrapolate that it becomes even worse, oh well you're traitors.

In Fatima's testimony, the *ḥijāb* becomes a racialised object, and becomes particularly unsettling for people when the wearer is white – inhabiting a previously unracialised identity. As this concept was covered in section 5.2.1 it is unnecessary to recap it here, except to reaffirm the words of Al-Saji where she poignantly states, "…while the veil is hypervisible as oppressive and repressive barrier, Muslim women 'behind the veil' are not merely invisible to the western gaze, but are made invisible as subjects" (2006, p. 886). In other words, Muslim women's complex personhoods and humanity are erased in favour of the hypervisible and racialised marker of the *ḥijāb*. The above quotations from the interview data support the suggestion that the *ḥijāb* continues to dominate much of the language and discourse around women's rights in Australia and in the West more generally, and is used to situate the wearers of *ḥijāb* as being outside of the cultural framework of what it means to be Australian. Here, the concern about *ḥijāb* is symbolic of a broader preoccupation with the idea that Islam is a misogynistic religion, and that white Muslim converts need to be 'rescued' from Islam through a return to white Australian modes of dress and culture.

Participants' experiences in this section highlighted the ways in which Islam is conceptualised as un-Australian, specifically through its positioning as an anti-secular religion, a security threat to the Australian nation and as culturally foreign to the Australian way of life. Unlike section 5.2, which discussed examples of interactions between participants and non-Muslims that explicitly

evoked 'race' and racialising discourses to locate Islam as a 'non-white race', this section examines the more subtle ways that Islam is located as the antithesis to whiteness. In the examples in this section, whiteness is evoked through references to Australian nationhood, wherein Australia is perceived as a "white possession," to use the language of Moreton-Robinson. In contemporary Australia, the dominant racial expression of the nation is whiteness (as is demonstrated in the literature I reviewed in Chapter Two and at the beginning of this section), and so positioning Islam as oppositional to Australian simultaneously positions it as oppositional to whiteness. Thus, white people who convert to Islam are not only viewed as being un-Australian, but may also be perceived as being "un-white," or less white than before.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the experiences and interactions of participants with their non-Muslim family, friends, colleagues and strangers. In doing so, it found that that "Muslim" is perceived by some non-Muslim Australians through racialised frames that views 'Muslim' as incompatible with whiteness. This chapter contributes to the existing literature about the racialisation of Muslims by theorising racialisation in juxtaposition with whiteness, arguing that within a national imaginary underpinned by a white racial identity and secular-yet-Christian religious identity, the cultural distance between Islam and whiteness is considered to be too vast to fully overcome without relinquishing some of their whiteness.

These attitudes were expressed in the interview data I collected through seven interrelated codes that all positioned Muslims on the 'outer' of Australia's national, racial and religious core identity. These seven expressions can be

sorted across three categories. The first viewed Islam as a different 'race' to whiteness, the second positioned Islam against Australia, and the third constructed Islam as a foreign and inferior culture. Isolating the different ways in which Muslims are racialised through empirical research can help us to build on the emerging literature about the racialisation of Islam.

CHAPTER SIX

ENTERING THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Five, I began to analyse the post-conversion experiences of white Muslim converts, as detailed in the qualitative data collected via in-depth interviews. Chapter Five focused on interactions between white converts and their non-Muslim family, friends, colleagues and strangers, and drew attention to the way these exchanges conveyed the notion that white converts had either 'left' the cultural space of whiteness, been repositioned to the margins of whiteness, or been classified into a different 'racial' category, often as 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern'. My analysis of the interview data suggests that racialising macro-level discourses about Muslims in Australia that position Muslims as being 'un-Australian' or 'non-white' may contribute to the racialisation of Muslims by non-Muslims in everyday settings. In Australian national discourse, a 'Muslim' identity has been established as one of 'Other' in contrast to the (white and Christian) Australian 'Self'. In this paradigm, Muslims are not only constituted as a religious Other, but a racial Other as well (Daulatzai 2012).

Of course, the assertion that Muslims are viewed as a racial Other in Western nations like Australia is not a new one. As I outlined in section 2.2, prior research has already demonstrated that Muslims are racialised in Australia through such discursive mechanisms (Poynting et al 2004; Dunn et al 2007; Humphrey 2007) and in other Western, white dominant nation states like the United Kingdom (Kyriakides et al 2009; Meer & Modood 2009), Canada (Nagra 2011) and the United States (Joshi 2006; Selod and Embrick 2013). What *is*

original about the research I have undertaken is that it illustrates how racialisation is felt and experienced by Muslims from the perspective of a group who were previously 'unraced' within Australia's national context, based on their interactions and exchanges with those non-Muslims who view Islam as incompatible with whiteness. These findings unsettle and destabilise traditional understandings of race by highlighting its tenuous foundations.

Even more unsettling are my findings relating to white converts' interactions with other Muslims, which are the focus of this chapter. My thematic analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that the perceived relationship between whiteness and Christianity, and the converse association between Islam and being non-white, is far from monodirectional – it was not simply non-Muslims who deemed Islam a 'non-white religion,' and imposed that understanding onto Muslims. Participant narratives indicate that for many of the converts interviewed, their experiences with Muslims raised questions in their mind about their own racial identity and what their whiteness denoted in the context of the Muslim community. Interactions within the Muslim community revealed to the participants that just as some non-Muslims viewed whiteness and Islam as incongruent, so too did some Muslims believe that a convert's whiteness was something that needed to be overcome or even erased in order to be a true and authentic Muslim. This idea was made manifest predominantly in one of two ways: either rendering white converts as being lesser or inferior Muslims because of their whiteness; or attempting to assimilate converts into their own ethnic cultures and communities. Conversely, some participants expressed the sense that their whiteness was seen as a positive attribute, as white converts were perceived to be more observant, devout and spiritually elevated than non-white Muslims (including other converts) because of the religious conviction required to 'overpower' their whiteness.

In this chapter, I document the diverse range of interactions that participants had with non-white Muslims that made them become cognisant or self-conscious of their whiteness and how it was viewed in relationship to their Muslim identity. I draw on participants' interpretations and recollections of these events to suggest that for some Muslims, whiteness and Islam are perceived to be so divergent that meeting white converts to Islam is at once unsettling, confusing and validating. I begin this chapter by offering two different but related theories for my argument that some Muslims in Australia view Islam and whiteness to be incompatible, just as some non-Muslims do. The first is a continuation of the theory advanced in the previous chapter, Chapter Five – that the subject identity of 'Muslim' in the Australian context is a highly racialised and reified identity (Poynting et al 2004). I suggest that this construction of Muslim as Other is first inculcated, then internalised and reproduced by Australian Muslims themselves, in response to regular reminders that they are not 'truly' Australian by virtue of their perceived racial and religious estrangement from the nation. Duderija (2010) explains this phenomenon amongst Muslims living in Western countries through a paradigm that he terms the 'self-other civilisational boundary impermissible mutual identity construction dialectic,' in which the Self constructs its self-identity in reference to how it is perceived by the Other, and also how it thinks it is perceived by the Other. In this framework, the 'Self' is Islam as a civilisational 'ummah' or community, and the Other is the West, a civilisational entity historically informed by Christianity. His position is supported by Randell-Moon, who contends that "the Orientalist assumption that constructs the West in opposition to Islam works to homogenise differences within each binary term and link the West and Islam to a corresponding set of essentialised representations" (2006, p. 8).

The second theory suggests that a view of whiteness that positions it as oppositional to Islam has less to do with Muslims internalising an Orientalist view of Islam than it does with the development of Muslim thought about the West, modernity, colonialism, secularism, Christianity and American imperialism over the last several hundred years (Waardenburg 2003; Esposito and Mogahed 2007; Kull 2011). Although there is little doubt that Muslim perceptions of the West are influenced by the West's own reading and portrayal of itself, the second theory I advance decentres the West and assigns Muslims more agency in their identity formation and interpretation of social and political affairs that take place around them. In acknowledging Muslim agency, the theory also recognises that Muslim conceptualisations of the West can and in some cases does reify the Self/Other dichotomy. It is this second theory which I will focus on in section 6.2, and that I contend significantly informs white converts' engagements with the Muslim community in Sydney, Australia, as illustrated in later sections. As section 6.2 and later sections will illustrate, whiteness is often articulated by Muslims in juxtaposition with Islam and as a site of superficiality, immorality and privilege gained through colonialism and foreign interventions; a social location marked by alienation and the absence of culture.

Following the theoretical orientation offered in sections 6.2, section 6.3 documents the most common reactions to white converts from other Muslims, which range from glorifying white converts as exceptional and special to deriding them as 'fake' Muslims. In this section, I argue that just as participants indicated that some non-Muslims had reified perceptions of Muslims, so too do some Muslims have essentialised views of white people, which they view to be at odds with a Muslim identity. In section 6.4 I extend this analysis to examine the expectations that some Muslims have of white converts, which indicate that

they felt that white converts needed to adopt a new cultural identity that was a better fit to their new religious identity. I draw out a number of expectations that Muslims had of participants, which they felt are rooted in cultural traditions and practices of various ethnic groups rather than in religion, including an expectation that they change their name, get married quickly, and change the way they dress. I contend that the reasons for this are partly because white converts are expected to "prove" themselves as exceptionally pious Muslims in order to demonstrate that they have left behind their white ways, but also because some Muslims themselves view Islam to be a racialised identity that needs to be visually demarcated from what is often seen as the cultural void of whiteness.

6.2 Muslim Constructions of 'The White West'

Much has been written about Western constructions of Muslims and Islam, with particular focus on how representations of the Muslim world that originate in the West are often Orientalist in nature (Morey and Yaqin 2011), and portray Muslims as alternatingly uncivilised, barbaric, exotic and irrational. There is less in the academic literature about the inverse relationship, or perceptions that Muslims hold about the West. This section draws on interview data to explore how Muslims construct the West, which in turn influences their perception of white converts to Islam. In agreement with both Alistair Bonnett and Sohail Daulatzai that 'the West' has come to be a stand-in for whiteness in recent times, as detailed in section 2.4, in this section I contend that for Muslims and non-Muslims living in the West, 'Western' has come to mean 'white' in most contexts, with some minor exceptions. Muslim constructions of the West, then, are by and large equivalent to Muslim constructions of whiteness; and

indeed, as this chapter will show, many Muslims in Australia do not distinguish between the one and the other, and use the terms interchangeably.

A broad empirical introduction to the question of how Muslims perceive the West can be found in the results of the 2011 Pew Research Centre Global Attitudes survey. The survey, which set out to explore the tensions between Muslim and Western publics, found that high percentages of the seven Muslim publics surveyed had very negative perceptions of the West, and considered Westerners to be selfish, arrogant, violent, greedy and immoral. Jordan had the highest percentages of people agreeing with the suggestion that Westerners are selfish, arrogant, violent, greedy, immoral and fanatical, with Lebanon producing much smaller numbers. While Indonesians had a more positive view of Westerners in 2011 than they had in 2006, as documented by the previous survey, Pakistanis surveyed expressed that their views had become more negative towards the West in the five years since they had last been surveyed (Pew Research Centre 2011). The percentages of Pakistani Muslims attributing negative characteristics to Westerners increased by double digits for every characteristic, sometimes by as much as twenty percent. It is likely that the growing ill will towards Westerners in Pakistan in the years between the two surveys was a result of the increased number of US drone attacks in Pakistan in those five years. This hypothesis seems particularly feasible when we consider that 2010 and 2011 saw a monumental increase in US drone attacks with 122 in 2010 and 73 in 2011, resulting in 1366 casualties (New America Foundation 2013). This is in comparison to the number of drone strikes in the years 2004-2006, of which there were only six.

The percentages of Muslims ascribing the stated negative characteristics to Westerners is slightly higher than that of the percentages of non-Muslims

attributing the same negative characteristics to Muslims, indicating that Muslims in the publics surveyed had more negative perceptions of the West than Westerners had of Muslims. In addition, the results of the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Survey which surveyed Muslims in Western countries as well as Muslims in Muslim-majority countries indicated that Muslims living in Muslim majority countries are more likely to ascribe these negative characteristics to non-Muslim Westerners, with lower percentages of Spanish, French and German Muslims ascribing the same character traits to non-Muslims. Conversely, European Muslims were more likely to state that they found non-Muslim Westerners to be generous and honest, compared to that of Muslims living in Muslim-majority countries (Pew Research Centre 2007). Interestingly, British Muslims had the most negative views of Westerners amongst the European publics surveyed, with between half to two thirds of those surveyed in Britain agreeing with the negative characteristics cited (Pew Research Centre 2007). Without conducting further research, it is unclear what reasons might account for these discrepancies. One possible hypothesis for why Muslims living in Europe are generally more favourable to 'Westerners' could be due to greater interaction with non-Muslim Westerners. Another explanation could very well be that the European Muslims surveyed see themselves as Westerners as well as Muslims and so include themselves and other Muslims in the category of "Westerners". Thus, European Muslims may approached the issue in a more nuanced way than through the binary lens of "the West versus Muslims" that the survey appears to promote.

The results of a Gallup poll conducted in 2002 amongst Muslims in nine Muslim majority countries document similar results. Gallup found that the majority of residents in all nine countries, which included Morocco, Pakistan, Iran, Kuwait and Lebanon, felt that the West did not care about poorer nations,

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treated minority groups in their own countries unfairly, and had high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, crime and corruption. In Gallup's analysis of the results, they stated:

> The image that dominates respondents' negative perceptions of the West is clear-cut: the immoral lifestyles, a weakening of family structure, a decline in social courtesy, and the loss of traditional deference to elders in Western nations… Completing the list of the most frequently volunteered sources of resentment of the West are perceptions that Westerners are arrogant and believe their societies and civilization are more superior and advanced; are excessively prone to interfere in the internal and political affairs of other nations; are insufficiently attached to their own religion, religious beliefs, and ethnicity (Gallup 2002, para 8).

The empirical data provided by the Pew Research Centre and Gallup is both informative and illuminating, highlighting that negative relations between Muslims and the West are by no means unilateral. Just as non-Muslims living in the West have stereotypical perceptions of a monolithic "Islam," so too do many Muslims have reified views of the West. However, the findings of the surveys also raise additional specific questions about how race (whiteness) and religion (Christianity) might influence the perception of the West as greedy, immoral, violent, selfish and arrogant. While the interview data I have collected can and does provide some insights here, there is room for further research in this topic area, particularly through qualitative research with non-white Muslims.

In this section, I will highlight three of the common associations that were related by non-white Muslims to the white converts that I interviewed: that of whiteness and power, whiteness as immoral and white culture as a weak culture, with reference to academic literature. While these are not the only associations that were raised in the interview, they are the ones that

participants themselves most frequently attributed as reasons for why some Muslims felt that whiteness and Islam were incompatible.

6.2.1 Whiteness and power

While the Pew Research Centre and Gallup surveys offer some insight into current Muslim attitudes about the West and whiteness, we must look to sources of information with a greater historical focus or longitudinal methodology to uncover why such attitudes exist. Dutch sociologist of religion Jacques Waardenburg is one of the few scholars to comprehensively examine Muslim constructions of the West from a sociological perspective, having spent a number of decades studying Islam and in particular examining relationships between Christians and Muslims. In his book "Muslims and Others: Relations in Context," Waardenburg maps relationships between Muslims and the West, and Islam and other religions, through pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Waardenburg also gives careful consideration to different geographical contexts within these time periods to illustrate that in the history of Muslim thought, there have been multiple "Wests" throughout the ages and across empires and continents. He begins his section on *Muslim Reflections in the West* with the observation that "the West traditionally suggested to Muslims the land of the setting sun (if not death). While for a younger generation it raised the hope of a new kind of life and future, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it became increasingly associated with power and riches and with the corresponding aggression and greed" (2003, p. 241).

Waardenburg is of course referring here to colonialism, and in particular the economic, political and social impacts of colonialism on lands with large Muslim populations. Not only did the West represent the exploitation of both

natural resources and human labour, apparent in the use of indentured labour and slavery in European colonies, but colonialism also signalled the end of the final Islamic Caliphate in the Ottoman Empire. The defeat and subsequent collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 left what was seen as a spiritual and political void in the Muslim world (Mozaffari 2009). According to Mehdi Mozaffari, the impact of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire on Muslim society and political thought cannot be understated, and he states that just as the end of the First World War led to widespread disenchantment amongst Europeans, "the demise of the Ottoman Empire deeply affected the Muslim world and gave birth to longings to restore the golden age of Islam (2009, p. 1).

Since then, numerous Islamist political movements have mobilised to fill the Caliphate's absence and return Islam to its former glory, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jamaat-e-Islami throughout Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in several Central Asian and Western countries. Given that Islamist movements have only risen over the last century (Alam 2009; Cepoi 2013; Jones and Smith 2002), it is clear that anti-West sentiments that originated at the time of colonialism continue to exist, and arguably contribute to negative attitudes about the West. The association between the negative characteristics attributed to Westerners as highlighted by Pew Research Centre and Gallup and the historical positioning of negative attitudes made by Waardenburg are thus highly apparent.

The association between whiteness and colonialism and the exploitation of Muslim-majority countries commonly arose in interviews, particularly when participants were asked what whiteness represented for them. Paul initially

responded to the question with reference to skin colour and ancestry, but when prompted further he added:

> There's some more – I guess a little more darker, sinister heart which is kind of linked to our colonial past where basically the European nation would basically go and just assume that they are God's gift to the world or whatever. And they would go and colonise non-whites, so that was the done thing a couple of centuries ago… So there's that sinister white heart where, I dunno – I don't even like using the word whiteness but just for want of a better description, it's convenient, that I think of that British colonial arrogance and I think of the Union Jack with its many negative connotations. And I don't associate that at all with non-white cultures.

Paul's explanation of the "sinister heart" of whiteness centres colonialism and European arrogance, the ramifications of which, he later states, are still evident today. It is possible that the arrogance he refers to is the same kind of 'arrogance' that features in the Pew Research Centre's findings, given that the Muslim publics surveyed were all colonised by European countries. Katherine also raises the issue of colonialism in her interview, observing that the history of colonialism is often treated in a denialist or dismissive fashion amongst white people:

> Especially being English, coming from the colonial legacy of having an Empire, ruling the rest of the world, and therefore having these weird Orientalist assumptions about other people. We still call our colonisers our adventurers, and we say they adventured all over the world and that's what we tell our children rather than we stole societies and committed genocides. Not so nice.

Michelle notes that non-white Muslims occasionally intimate that she could never fully shed her whiteness precisely because of her colonial heritage as a white person, and that she carries that legacy around with her at all times:

> In some circles I've heard comments like, 'Oh okay you're not Arab then you don't really know that much about Islam, because it's not really your heritage.' And that your heritage is kind of – I don't know, to colonise other people's countries, or whatever it might be that white people have done in the

past. So there's a lot of thought that you can never really get out of the habit of being white, of being a non-Muslim.

In these situations, Michelle felt that being white was to some Muslims synonymous with being non-Muslim, an identity that she finds hard to shake precisely because her heritage is tied to an experience of colonialism in which her ancestors were ostensibly the colonisers, rather than the colonised.

In addition to colonialism, some participants referenced the more recent "War on Islam" and foreign interventions by the West into countries like Iraq and Afghanistan as being the reason for negative attitudes towards the West. Andrew offered Western interventions as an explanation for why he felt that some non-white Muslims did not "fully trust" him, observing that "when it's their country that we're bombing, why should they trust us? As far as they know, I support that kind of thing, cos I'm white." Similarly, Anna reflected that she finds it hard to know how to act around Muslims sometimes because she constantly feels guilty about her whiteness due to current events: "It's silly, probably. As a Muslim I feel outraged about these wars overseas and drone attacks but then I feel guilty and think, do I even have a right to feel that, when it's your people, you know. You're kind of in two camps." Andrew, Anna and Michelle all acknowledge and to some extent even agree with the context for anti-Western sentiments they occasionally encounter. Despite their recognition of the validity of these sentiments, they express that they still find it difficult to negotiate their white identity in Muslim spaces as a result, because they feel that they are never fully accepted or full trusted by non-white Muslims.

Some participants also linked whiteness to power and dominance more generally. Ahmed suggests that this perception is sometimes raised in objections to white men marrying Indonesian women, as it is characterised as a form of neo-colonialism:

One person who was hostile to the idea of our marriage beforehand said that it's just a new form of colonialism. White people coming and marrying Indonesian women, you know, before they took our resources and now they want to take Indonesian women as well. Through having access because of wealth and so on. There's a lot of mistrust of foreigners when it comes to marriage. One of the first questions my wife gets asked is "Does he treat you well?" Because there is a perception that foreigners, although they are attractive and have wealth and have ability and so on, basically don't respect Indonesian people.

Ahmed's explanation supports analysis provided by the Gallup survey, which states that one perception that Muslims have of Westerners is that they simply exploit poorer nations rather than assisting them; in this case, through indirect means as well as via economic exploitation. If we adopt Waardenburg's approach, it can be argued that this viewpoint is not simply espoused by a minority of non-white Muslims, but that it plays a significant role in informing global political discourse amongst Muslim societies. As Waardenburg states:

The Muslim political discourse on the West is based on the experience of the West as a power, and its main concern is how to respond to that power. In its critical form, it perceives the West as the origin of forces destructive of the Muslim world. In the past, colonialism was the most obvious form of the imperialist policies of the West. Nowadays, the latter imposes itself through economic, political, and cultural imperialism (2003, p. 254).

The Pew Research Centre and Gallup surveys indicate that rather than being a marginal standpoint, the association of the West with colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and capitalist exploitation has come to form a normative and hegemonic discourse about the West in Muslim majority countries and even Muslim minorities within the West. This discourse undoubtedly influences the approach taken by some non-white Muslims that white converts are embedded in these systems of domination by virtue of their whiteness, casting doubt on the authenticity of their Muslim identity.

6.2.2 Whiteness and immorality

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that many participants were told by non-white Muslims, directly or indirectly, that white people were immoral, depraved and/or lacking in spirituality. Stephanie indicated that it was primarily for this reason that she sometimes felt that some non-white Muslims questioned her ability to adhere to the faith. She referred to one incident which took place at her friend's birthday party. The party was for women only, and so many of the women attending took off their scarves and wore more revealing clothes. Stephanie recalled:

> Some of the girls, they were just joking but they were making jokes like… Oh I bet you used to wear these kind of dresses all the time, you probably hooked up with heaps of guys… And it shouldn't have upset me but it did 'cause I'm just like, you've known me for almost 6 years ago, I've been Muslim for that long. I just think, will they ever just see me as someone like them or will I always be the girl that used to be non-Muslim.

Stephanie emphasises that she had never been directly told by another Muslim that they thought she was not a real Muslim, but that it was simply a feeling that she got when her friends made jokes about her pre-Muslim life. Likewise, Fatima explained that she was often quizzed about her life pre-conversion by strangers as well as friends:

> I always get questions, 'Did you used to have a boyfriend, have you had sex before, have you taken drugs.' That was one of the main reasons that I stopped telling people I was white. They would just ask me all types of questions. And I just thought, well if God can forgive me for the sins I've committed beforehand and given me a fresh plate, why can't you guys?

Fatima's descriptions of the types of question she was asked by some Muslim women indicates that in her case, other Muslims displayed an almost voyeuristic fascination with her life pre-Islam. In this scenario, Fatima is akin to an exotic zoo animal or the subject of an anthropological study. Her experiences

highlighted that for some non-white Muslims, white people are just as much an object of fascination for their perceived difference as Muslims in the West may be to non-Muslims, as suggested by Mohja Kahf in her monograph 'Western Representations of Muslim Women' (1997). Importantly, as well as whiteness being simply different to Islam, whiteness is specifically linked to immorality as understood in Islamic law; expressed through references to pre-marital sexual activity, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, and wearing clothing that is considered immodest according to Islamic codes of dress.

While the Islamic concept of morality is one that is enforced through legal codes about what Muslims are allowed to wear, imbibe and otherwise do for the purposes of creating a functioning and stable society, the West is characterised as a place where "anything goes," and people are driven by their own individual desires and whims. It is for this reason that the West and thus 'whiteness' are so closely associated with immorality in the minds of some Muslims, which can then translate to a questioning of the faith and commitment of white converts to Islam: if whiteness is inextricably linked to the West, and the West is an immoral society incompatible with Islam, can white Muslims ever truly be rid of their immoral ways?

Waardenburg provides a poetic description of the notion that the West is morally and spiritually deficient as it is deployed in Muslim intellectual traditions:

> Here, "the West" represents a world that may best be described as barbarian (a modern *jāhilīyyah* from an Islamist viewpoint). In this meaning, the West stands for a disintegrating society in which egoism and human solitude prevail. It is the land of loss of mind, where materialism reigns and where people are imprisoned by their desire for goods and money. It is the land of loss of soul, where secularity dominates and people drift without deeper norms and higher values. It is the land of loss of true feelings, where changing appetites are the norm and people fall victim to desire and lust. It is the land of loss of human dignity, with a value system based on economics, and where people

aggressively exploit each other. Finally, it is the land of metaphysical alienation and loss of God, with human-made idols and people who have no relationship to Being, nature, history, or each other (2003, p. 249).

The prevailing notion of spiritual deficiency that Waardenburg alludes to can perhaps be theorised with reference to the operation of Christian-coded secularism as the dominant religious expression in Australia. It is worth noting that both Dede and Waardenburg do not reference whiteness in their discussions, but instead centre on "the West," which I have argued previously is articulated through a white racial identity and Christian-centric secular religious identity. As I posited in section 5.3.1, Christianity in Australia works through secularism and "reincarnates" itself *as* secularism, to use the words of Gil Anidjar. In doing so, it positions itself as 'the secular', and Islam as 'religion.' If we take Christianity to be racially coded as white, as I have argued throughout this thesis, then whiteness becomes synonymous with the secular, and correspondingly to a form of Christianity that intentionally masks its own theological core and spiritual substance and emphasises its economic and political functions. Anidjar highlights this when he says of Christianity, "It is rather a massively hegemonic - if divided, changing, and dynamic - corporate institution, a set of highly plastic institutions, and the sum total of philosophical and scientific, economic and political achievements, discursive, administrative, and institutional accomplishments" (2006, p. 58). The perception of a spiritual deficiency in the West and in whiteness can be attributed to the perception of spiritual deficiency in modern Christianity, which facilitates the acceptance of the 'immorality' I discussed in the previous section.

In some extreme cases, this thinking is extrapolated to view the very presence of white converts as an affront to the purity of Muslim spaces. Kath described an incident which took place before she started wearing the headscarf:

> I've had someone at the mosque scream at me and tell me I was *najas* and tell me to get out of the mosque because I was a filthy person… She just saw me as a convert and she saw that I had blonde hair. And I was working at another designer at a time, and I used to work at Kings Cross and so I'd walk down to Surry Hills mosque to pray *jumuʿah*. So she'd just seen me walking like an Aussie woman, and she came after me like, just saying that I was filthy. She told me to get out of the mosque, I couldn't pray because I was *najas*. I was in tears, I couldn't stop crying. I cried for four hours straight. I cried 'til I was vomiting almost. She was like, pushing me out of the mosque and she was telling all the people at the mosque that I was dirty, that I was filthy, that I was a *kāfir*. She told me I could pray in the stairwell cos that's where I belonged.

Kath's experience was one of the most violent and extreme of the negative experiences recounted by participants, and demonstrates that some non-white Muslims can view the very presence of a white person as a source of impurity and moral erosion. Kath posited that she believed it was her whiteness specifically which enraged the woman enough to force her out of the mosque. She noted that while she was not wearing a headscarf when she first entered, she was dressed modestly and donned one of the communal headscarves as soon as she walked in as many other Muslim women did, and so it was not an issue of her clothes but her skin colour. As well as underlining the tendency of some Muslims to associate whiteness with dirtiness and immorality, Kath's story also supports the conclusions that Rachel Woodlock draws in her article on how female convert women from Melbourne engage with mosques, in which she argued that gendered and cultural prejudice work in tandem to limit convert women's access to mosques. Woodlock (2010, p. 276) posited that the domination of many mosques by different immigrant ethnic groups means that "there is no place for the culture of the Australian convert to operate" – here, the "Australian convert" is typically white, and is arguably restricted in her ability to participate in racialised religious spaces because of her whiteness.

It is interesting to note that the idea that whiteness is inextricably linked to *sexual* immorality only arose in my interviews with convert women. White men in this research project were far more likely to suggest that they were perceived as a threat (e.g. a potential spy) by non-white Muslims, whereas white women stated that they were viewed as sexually promiscuous and immoral. This suggests that the fear of immorality is a gendered one. Yen Le Espiritu's work on Filipina Americans is illuminating in this regard, as her work indicates that this perception of white women is not limited to non-white Muslims in Australia. Le Esperitu states that the Filipina women she interviewed felt that "American" women (which she notes meant white women) were "sexually promiscuous," and that Filipina women who were perceived to have "assumed the sexual mores of white women" were referred to as being "Americanised or Westernised" (2001, pp. 426-427). She explains that the denigration of white women through reference to their sexuality is a rejoinder to the hypersexualisation and demonisation of Filipina American women and Asian-American women by white Americans in general, stating that "racialised groups also criticise the morality of white women as a strategy of resistance – a means of asserting a morally superior public face to the dominant society" (2001, p. 416). Importantly, Le Espiritu notes that in the immigrant community's attempt to "reaffirm to itself its self-worth in the face of economic, social, political and legal subordination" (2001, p. 436) they reinforce patriarchal norms and restrictions on women's sexuality.

Although Le Espiritu's research occurs in a very different context to my own, it is possible that non-white Muslims who express curiosity or even contempt about women converts' sexual histories may also have developed a negative view of white women's "immoral" sexuality as a counterposition to Muslim women's "pure" sexuality. This is difficult to establish based on my interview

data, as I only have the perspective of white converts themselves as to how non-white Muslims perceive them. My findings, coupled with the research of Le Espiritu, highlight the need for further research that addresses non-white Muslims themselves about how they view whiteness in relation to sexual morality.

6.2.3 Whiteness as culturally void

The final Muslim perception of the West that I wish to examine in this chapter is the idea that the West is culturally void, and that white people either lack in culture entirely or that their culture is a weak one. The idea that whiteness constitutes a "cultural void" is broached in Frankenberg's ethnographic study of white women in the United States, where her participants described feeling a sense of "nothingness" and "having no people" (1993, p. 231). Frankenberg suggests the expression of whiteness as culturally barren is because whiteness is projected as "human," and so any cultural specificity is perceived as a general thing that all humans do, whereas aspects of other cultures are clearly and racially marked as 'different.' Thus, the perception that whiteness exists in a cultural void is closely related to the idea that whiteness is considered by white people to be both normal and natural, a notion that has been explored in great depth in the whiteness studies literature, as I reviewed in section 2.4.

There is far less literature that speaks to the question of whether people who are racialised as non-white also view whiteness as culturally void. As I have explained earlier in section 2.4, scholars such as bell hooks and W.E.B. Du Bois have stated that whiteness is invisible and racially neutral only to white people, and that members of racialised groups are acutely aware of the existence and operation of whiteness as a racial identity. In this literature, however, the question of whether white people are perceived to have a

'culture' is not addressed. Unfortunately, this question cannot be addressed by this research project either, as I did not interview non-white Muslims about their perception of whiteness and white people. What the interview data I collected does show is that at least one of the white converts in this study believed that non-white Muslims saw them as lacking culture by virtue of their whiteness, in comparison to non-white people who had strong cultural practices and values. In contrast to the two previous constructions of the West which position whiteness as incompatible to Islam, the idea that whiteness is culturally deficient is one that works in favour for white Muslim converts, insofar as it can be argued that a 'weaker' culture is easier to assimilate into a 'strong' culture that is underpinned by centuries of tradition, rituals and customs. Fatima raises this perspective in the interview, stating that people in the Pakistani community that she had married into generally felt it was easier for a white person to convert to Islam than someone from a non-white background who already had strong cultural ties to another culture or religion:

> In Pakistan there is this idea that East Asians have a strong culture, whereas lots of people don't so much have a strong culture. That it is harder to marry an Asian convert because they're already coming into with it these strong cultural values, whereas when you marry a Western convert they pretty much give up their Western culture at the door, they leave it at the door. It's harder for an East Asian convert to leave their culture and come into an Islamic culture or be a part of Pakistani culture because those cultures will also be at odds.

When asked why Western culture was seen as being easy to leave "at the door," she clarified:

> I think to a large extent a lot of Pakistanis see the West as not really being a strong culture, they see it as a young culture, a culture that changes with every generation… I think there is the idea that the West is sort of fluid and sort of young and is very multicultural and heterogeneous and have people with all these different ideas, and that thereby makes it a weaker culture in a sense because you get all these different people with different views and often opposing views.

Fatima's reflections suggest that for some Muslims, white converts may be seen as more malleable and impressionable than converts from non-white backgrounds because their culture is 'young' and heterogeneous. In this context, whiteness becomes a virtue rather than a barrier to fully accepting Islam and adopting racialised customs associated with the cultural practices of Islam. In Fatima's quotation, the West is used synonymously with 'white,' as the Pakistani people she refers to also live in the West but do not associate themselves or East Asians with being Western. Fatima's suggestion is illuminating in the light of my previous discussion of secularism in Chapter Five. There, I posited Anidjar's theory that Christianity and secularism coalesce as one in Western societies; in Anidjar's words, they "function together as covers, strategic devices and mechanisms of obfuscation and self-blinding, doing so in such a way that it remains difficult, if not impossible, to extricate them from each other - or us from either of them - as if by fiat" (Anidjar 2006, p. 62). If we take the premise that Christianity is the religious articulation of whiteness, as I have argued in previous chapters, and we also agree with Anidjar that Christianity has successfully reincarnated itself as secularism in the modern era, then the culture of whiteness may indeed seem 'young' and culturally vacuous, despite the fact that Christianity is several centuries older than Islam. This is further supported by the historical analysis of Christian and secularism offered by Smith, where he argues that "Christianity has always been a religion with a fluid, evolving identity – it has a history of changing shape" (2007, p. 7). Anidjar suggests that the current manifestation of Christianity was manufactured in an attempt to remain relevant in the wake of rapid social change and a decline in Church attendance in the West, and by its reinvention of itself as "new" secularism, successfully obscured its theological lineage.

The key change in the current reincarnation of Christianity – secularism - is, according to Smith, the separation of Christian doctrine from Christian ethics (2007, p. 7). Smith posits that Christian ethics is central to Western secularism, apparent in "the ongoing commitment to do good, understood in traditional Christian terms, without a concern for the technicalities of the teachings of the Church" (Smith 2007, p. 3). In the absence of Christian doctrine, what remains is somewhat vague and abstract – there is little in the way of practical guidelines for how one should "do good." This alone goes a long way to explaining Fatima's suggestion that some Muslims view the culture of the West/whiteness as culturally vacant or deficient. If customs, symbols, beliefs and norms of behaviour are as important to culture as values are, and the Christian West has largely discarded all but the latter (as suggested by Smith), then it is not surprising that adherents of a religion that places significant emphasis on day-to-day rituals and practices may find the West to be culturally deficient. The importance of Christian doctrine to the establishment of Western culture is also articulated by Smith later in his book when he states that the development of Christian doctrine as distinct from Judaism was in large part due to a desire to distinguish Christians culturally from Jews. He notes that the new religion of Christianity sought to distance itself from the Jewish identity of Jesus of Nazareth, because "many non-Jews were not prepared to become culturally Jewish" (2007, p. 73). It is clear from his analysis of early Christianity that Christian doctrine played a large role in shaping the culture of the West, and by association, whiteness.

Fatima was the only participant who explicitly expressed that her interactions with other Muslims had indicated that white people were viewed as being culturally deficient. However, some participants described that non-white Muslims would often expect them to immediately drop their own cultural

traditions and traits, such as their name, in favour of another culture's practices, as though their pre-existing culture did not have much tenacity. Some of these experiences are explored more thoroughly in section 6.4 where I discuss expectations of converts. Additionally, as I will illustrate in Chapter Seven, some of the participants described themselves as being acultural, and indicated that they were able to practice a more 'pure' Islam than non-white Muslims who are held back by cultural baggage. In contrast, other participants who expressed a feeling of cultural dearth adopted the cultural traditions, customs, and sometimes language of another ethnic group because they felt that it made their transition into the Muslim community smoother and less contested.

6.3 Muslim Reactions to White Converts

Participants in this research project spoke about encountering a diverse range of responses when other Muslims found out that they were Muslim converts and also white. The most common response was to be asked why they converted, but other reactions included disbelief, glorification, suspicion and scepticism about their religiosity. In this section, I contend that these different and in some cases even contradictory reactions all hinge on the idea that whiteness and Islam are if not diametrically opposed, then at the very least they are inconsonant. In the introduction to this chapter, I offered two theories for why this notion exists in the minds of Muslims, and suggested that it had less to do with Muslims internalising an Orientalist view of Islam than it did with Muslim perceptions of the West, developed over a number of centuries. This section will help illustrate this theory in the context of white converts' engagements with the Muslim community in Sydney, Australia. Rather than whiteness being

celebrated in the stories that participants recounted, whiteness is instead most often articulated as a site of superficiality, immorality and privilege gained through colonialism and foreign interventions; a social location lacking in culture and human connection. In the following sections, I will detail how this notion is expressed to white converts through non-white Muslims' responses to finding out that they are Muslims.

6.3.1 Questions about conversion

A common experience amongst participants with regards to their contact with other Muslims was being asked about their reasons for converting. Many participants stated that as white Muslims, they felt that they "stood out" at mosques and other spaces and events that Muslims frequented, as they formed a clear and visible minority. These same participants suggested that because they were white, Muslims often assumed they were converts and thus the question of why they converted was one that they faced on a regular basis from Muslims. Two of the participants, Stephanie and Imogen, posited that it was only occasionally that they were asked about their conversion story, and that they were happy to share their story when asked. Stephanie expressed that she viewed it as her duty to both Muslims and non-Muslims; in her words, to "inspire" the former and "educate" the latter. Similarly, Imogen explained that she saw it as a form of *da'wah*, which literally translates from Arabic to mean "invitation" and is used in this context to refer to an invitation to Islam; in other words, a form of proselytising. Here, Imogen does not just mean preaching to non-Muslims, but also to Muslims, stating: "I think it's important… other Muslims, sometimes people lose their way and when they meet someone like me who has taken this step, it's inspiring. They tell me, I reminded them about what they love about their *dīn*. That's a big responsibility, and an honour too."

Importantly, both Imogen and Stephanie were relatively new Muslims at the time of interview, having converted less than a year earlier. It is very possible that they had yet to reach the saturation point described by converts who had been Muslim for some years. This latter group of participants were far more likely to find the abundance of questions they were asked about their "conversion stories" irritating. Some of them, like Belinda, tolerated it as part and parcel of being a convert. Belinda suggested that other Muslims found the stories of converts inspiring, and that it motivated them to practice their religion with more consistency. For this reason, she was willing to endure the constant stream of questions:

> We all hate when people ask us, how did you convert? Or, why did you convert? It's such an annoying question. Like, we don't care why anyone else converted. Islam speaks for itself. It makes sense... But I feel like we shouldn't ever be anti- that. We should always use it as an opportunity to talk to people cos it inspires people that are brought up Muslims.

Like Stephanie and Imogen, Belinda refers to the 'inspirational' aspect of conversion stories, and cites this as the reason she consents to the seemingly unceasing queries she receives from other Muslims. While Belinda reluctantly accepts the questions because of a sense of duty to other Muslims, participants such as Ibrahim expressed frustration at what he called "the Muslim Inquisition": being interrogated frequently about his reasons for converting, often by people he had only just met. Ibrahim, who had converted at the age of 19 some sixteen years before the interview, stated that he disliked being asked about his conversion because it was a constant reminder to him that he was viewed as an outsider by other Muslims, and that his Muslim identity always had to be qualified by the term "convert." When asked whether he is still questioned about his conversion story today, Ibrahim replied:

> Yes. All the time. Or at least it feels like that. Probably less than when I first converted. I've lived in Sydney for most of that time so I know a lot of people in

the community and they don't ask anymore. But now and then I'll meet someone new who'll come in all eager and - "Brother, can I please ask, why did you convert?" And I just want to yell or something, I mean I've been Muslim almost half my life, probably for longer than these kids have been out of diapers.

Ibrahim adds that if he was not white he would not have to endure these questions, and expressed frustration at the fact that his whiteness singles him out for special treatment. He noted that non-white friends of his who had converted to Islam far more recently were able to "fly under the radar," while he "stick[s] out like a sore thumb." Ibrahim recognised that his whiteness is constituted as different and Other in the context of Muslim communities, a realisation that makes him uncomfortable. His interview suggests that his irritation has less to do with the volume of questions he is asked about his conversion and more to do with the fact that such questions reinforce to him that he is a raced individual, and that amongst Muslims his whiteness does not afford him the racial invisibility he is accustomed to. Ibrahim finds this exposure confronting precisely because he had never considered himself to be white previously, which he alludes to later in the interview; in response to a question about how he articulates his white identity, Ibrahim responds: "I don't know… I don't, it's not like I see myself as white. I'm just me. I still don't. That doesn't stop others from thinking I'm white though. I mean, I am white, I guess." His hesitation about self-identifying as white is tempered in this quotation by his reluctant admission that he is in fact white, and that non-white Muslims view him as white, as evidenced by their assumption that Ibrahim is a convert and their continued references to him being a convert, a situation that frustrated Ibrahim.

Questions about conversion function as a reminder to white converts that they are seen as different to other, non-white converts, and may even be perceived as

outsiders. For most of the white converts interviewed, this sense of "not belonging" comes as a surprise, and for some like Ibrahim, even an affront to their sense of how they should be treated. The unsettling feeling of being an outsider is heightened because their lived experience of whiteness prior to becoming Muslim was a racially invisible, normative one. When they realise that their whiteness marks them as different in the context of Muslim communities that are largely made up of non-white racialised groups and attracts extra attention as a result, some participants experience frustration and annoyance at being racially marked.

6.3.2 'Always the convert'

As well as being asked about their conversion story, the participants of this research project were exposed to a range of other responses about their conversion, including surprise, joy, reverence, suspicion and dismissal. For many participants, their conversion to Islam and subsequent engagement with the Sydney Muslim community emphasised to them that in some cultural spaces within Sydney, their whiteness acted like a neon sign identifying them as foreign, as Other, as raced where they had previously seen themselves as unraced. Some, like Katherine, posited that their whiteness meant that they would never be accepted as "just Muslim." Katherine identified that her whiteness played a fundamental role in the immutability of her convert status, suggesting that as a white Muslim her convert identity is forever attached to her. When asked if she would ever stop being the convert, Katherine stated:

> No, not ever. Not in my whole life, no. In fact, I know kids of converts who are my age who have always been Muslim. Doesn't matter, they are always the convert - even though they're not the convert at all.

Like other participants who expressed similar thoughts about their convert status, Katherine is resigned to the inevitability of always being "the convert."

When questioned further as to what being a convert represents to other Muslims, Katherine contends that converts are more likely to be dismissed as ignorant, even if the opinions that they express are also expressed by born Muslims:

> Especially if you're saying something which is different to what they're saying – even though it might be still a mainstream Muslim opinion, the reason you hold it is 'cause you're a convert is the assumption made. And you know, you just don't know and you can't read Qur'an properly. And to be honest, I agree with the idea that the Qur'an is an Arabic text and in English you'll never know it as well as if you were reading it in Arabic. But at the same time there is definitely the, "You don't know as much, you're a convert" kind of thing.

Katherine's thoughts are mirrored by a number of other participants who also suggest that to some Muslims, their whiteness and corresponding unshakeable convert status renders them as spiritually inferior and religiously naïve. Henry stated that he felt he was constantly being reminded by non-white Muslims that they expected him to know less than they did in matters of religion:

> I couldn't tell you how many times people have asked me if I knew how to pray or that I need to wash myself with water after I've been to the loo or… I honestly couldn't tell you. It would be a lot of times though, that's for sure. It's hard, being treated like a kid when you're in your 30's. I'm getting kind of sick of it.

Henry's quotation calls attention to what he views as a paternalistic attitude towards white converts like himself. Intrinsic to this approach to white converts is first the assumption that they are a convert to Islam, as well as an assumption of ignorance on the part of the convert. In Henry's case, the assumption was made even before the other person had asked him how long he had been Muslim for. For Omar, it did not matter if they knew how long ago he had converted, it was still assumed that he was uneducated about the Islamic religion. Omar rattled off a long list of situations in which complete strangers such as taxi drivers, waiters and people that he met at parties asked him if he

was familiar with some of the most fundamental of Islamic beliefs and practices – even after he told them that he had been Muslim for over 18 years.

> They ask me if I know that alcohol is *ḥarām*, if I fast during Ramadan, if I have memorised a*l-Fātiḥah*… It's unbelievable. You may have been Muslim for longer than they have been an adult but it doesn't matter, they will still question your knowledge of Islam. They ask if I pray at the mosque. They ask if I'm circumcised. It's never-ending.

Omar acknowledged that there was no ill intent behind the questions, but admitted that they still irritated him because of the assumptions that they revealed about converts – that converts are more ignorant than those raised Muslim, and that they will take far longer to learn about Islam.

While most of the interviewees acknowledged that their understanding of Islam was more limited than the Muslims they knew when they first converted, with the exception of those who had spent a long time researching and studying Islam before they took *shahādah*, those who had been Muslim for some years questioned the patronising attitude which some Muslims took towards them, and expressed disapproval at the inference that they were Islamically ignorant. In reference to the phenomenon of white converts being assumed to be ignorant regardless of how long they had been Muslim, Daniel observed: "If you're a Turk from Turkey most people are not going to come up to you and be like, 'Do you know how to pray?' or 'Have you been on Ḥajj?'" Daniel added that the assumption was founded on the misconceived notion that someone from an "Islamised culture" was automatically a more knowledgeable and more pious Muslim. He recounted, "I've had Muslims tell me that Muslims have been able to assimilate other cultures into... like, Islamise other cultures, but this modern, Western, whitish culture is something different and it can never be assimilated."

Other participants expressed similar views, suggesting that they felt that their whiteness was viewed by non-white Muslims to be a barrier to their full comprehension of Islam, regardless of the amount of religious education they received, as though the limits of their religiosity and religious knowledge was racially determined. The more a convert is able to "shed" their whiteness, presumably by adopting the customs and traditions of a culture that is racialised in Australia, the more they will be accepted and treated as real Muslims, and the less their knowledge of the faith will be questioned. Daniel also indicated that the inverse is true – that the more a convert demonstrates their commitment to the religion of Islam, the less likely they are to be viewed as white by other Muslims. He illustrated his point by recounting an incident in which a Muslim friend told him that he no longer saw Daniel as white. Daniel stated that his friend had intended the comment to be a compliment to Daniel, and testament to the fact that he had fully embraced Islam and had managed to offset or offload his whiteness.

Connected to this notion of converts as inherently ignorant about Islam was the idea that converts did not have as much of a right to question or challenge things that they saw take place within the community amongst people who were raised Muslim. As Katherine stated in an earlier quotation in this section, it did not matter if she was simply citing a mainstream scholarly opinion – if it was contradictory to what a born Muslim opined, it was likely to be ignored or challenged. Imogen stated that she had experienced this phenomenon time and time again, and added that she felt this was amplified because she was a woman:

> I'm more confident now to speak out about things I disagree with but especially when I was younger, I might question something that someone did or said and say, 'but hang on, that's not what Islam says about' - whatever it might be, whether it's polygamy or… and people would tell me that I didn't understand

because I was a convert, I hadn't been Muslim for long enough. No one said it was because I was a woman but I definitely felt the implication was there. A convert challenging something your community has been doing for years is bad enough but a *female* convert? That's just not on.

Like Imogen, Florian expressed frustration at not being able to question things amongst certain groups of Muslims, particularly as he felt that type of thinking was antithetical to the way he had been raised in France.

The thing that I don't like is sometimes when you ask questions, people just tell you the answer, like take it or leave it. I'm not really used to that kind of thinking… the tone is more like, 'Anyway you're just a convert so this is the answer, you better live with it. So that's some of the typical tone you know. And then in the end you start saying to yourself, yeah okay, then I won't ask questions.

In the above examples, the presumed ignorance of the Muslim converts interviewed is arguably heightened by their whiteness. By that I mean that not only are they assumed to be uneducated about Islam because they are converts, but their whiteness is viewed as a barrier to them ever transcending their convert status. Non-white converts can blend in with other non-white Muslims in the Sydney community over time, and eventually no longer need to identify themselves as a convert unless they want to or some specific situation arises involving their family or previous faith community; in contrast, white converts are irrevocably identifiable as different by virtue of their appearance. Additionally, as exemplified in the quotations by Katherine, Imogen and Florian, contentions raised by white converts are automatically viewed as originating from a place of ignorance, or even Western arrogance – as highlighted in a story told by Imogen in which she questioned a particular Islamic ruling about women and was told by another Muslim woman to "leave [her] Western feminist ego at the door."

In the above situations, the racial identity of white converts becomes essentialised; their whiteness is seen as fixed and immovable, and thus white converts become subjected to the same racialising processes that non-white people are. Rather than being racialised as non-white, as some of the experiences documented in Chapter Five related, white converts are made acutely aware of their white racial subjectivity through their engagement with non-white Muslims. For many participants, this is a disorientating and unsettling realisation, a phenomenon which several scholars of whiteness studies have documented through their own empirical research on the lived experience of whiteness (Durie 2003, Fasching-Varner et al 2012, Frankenberg 1993) and which I will comment upon in detail in Chapter Seven. The engagements of white converts to Islam with non-white Muslims is particularly illuminating because their whiteness is seen as a barrier to their access to and knowledge of "authentic Islam," indicating that not only do the non-white Muslims referred to in this section see white converts as being irrevocably white, but they also view Islam as being an inherently non-white religion.

In addition to the ideas that white converts are ignorant about Islam and have less authority to question non-white Muslims about their religious practice or knowledge, another common perception of white converts related by participants was that white converts were potentially always just a step away from leaving the religion or falling into sin, and that they were more vulnerable as a result of their whiteness. Michelle commented that often the non-white Muslims she met implied that they didn't believe that she and other white converts could ever be truly Muslim, or truly practising, because their culture was so far removed from that of Muslim cultures and was mired by immorality, a notion that I explored in section 6.2.2. As Michelle stated:

So there's a lot of thought that you can never really get out of the habit of being white, of being a non-Muslim, such that people think that you're always gonna want to drink, or that you're gonna wanna eat pork, or do other things that non-Muslims supposedly do all the time. Or do immoral things, for example.

Michelle suggests that this frame of thinking is divisive and harmful to relations between Muslims as it presupposes that religiosity can be determined through birthright rather than through an individuals' actions and intentions. A number of participants mentioned similar experiences with people who felt that because they were white, they were susceptible to lapsing into *ḥarām* acts at any moment. As one participant, James put it: "On one hand, they might say 'Māshāʾ Allāh, subḥān'Allāh you are better than us!' and kiss your feet. And then another group of people are just waiting for you to make one wrong move so they can say, 'Aha! I told you he wasn't a real Muslim.'" All of the participants who referenced such experiences linked the latter attitude specifically with the fact that they were white, which they thought some Muslims viewed as a barrier to being a 'true Muslim' because of the perceived cultural difference between Islam and whiteness. White converts were thus seen by some to be more likely to leave the religion than those who were raised in Muslim families. Oftentimes this arose in interviews in relation to discussions of marriage. Xander described the difficulties he faced when he approached his wife's family about marriage as being "all about the fact that I was white":

I think her family would have had an issue with anyone who wasn't Indonesian but it was like, ten times worse that I was white. They didn't trust me. First they didn't, they thought that I would be some kind of extreme zealot who would force Zeynab into a *niqāb* or something, then they thought I would, I don't know, like… corrupt her or something. Turn her into an alcoholic, I don't know… It was always the two extremes. And I'm over here like, well which is it, am I too religious or not religious enough?

The responses that Xander identified arose frequently in the interview data. While Xander found that his whiteness was a barrier to marriage because non-

white Muslims associated his whiteness and "Aussieness" with *ḥarām* activities, such as drinking alcohol, Michelle found that her whiteness attracted Muslims who wanted a wife who would participate in such activities. She uses the example of her ex-husband to demonstrate her point. She recalls that soon after they were married he told her to take off her scarf, and insisted that she had to listen to him because he was her husband. His demands escalated quickly; he began to try and persuade her to go to clubs with him, drink alcohol, and take drugs. When Michelle refused and told him that she had never taken drugs or drunk even before she became Muslim, he threatened to force her by putting ecstasy in her drink. Michelle suggests that he and other men like him choose to marry white converts because they think that white women will be more likely to condone and practise impermissible acts themselves, so the men can look respectable in front of their families whilst committing sins with the support of their wives. Michelle states that his expectations were completely misguided, as she had a relatively conservative, strict upbringing where no one drank in the house because her parents were both religious Christians. She observed however that even when she tells other people this, "Muslims still think I've had this wild upbringing where I've been allowed to do what I like... Because I'm Australian they have these ideas about you." Michelle's story highlights the assumption that many Muslims make about white converts and their perception that they have a predisposition to *ḥarām* activities, and thus must work harder and be more visibly religious to prove that they are not going to revert to un-Islamic practices.

A less common, but more malicious response that arose in the interview data was suspicion that government spies were masquerading as converts to get information about Muslims. Florian framed this attitude as something that was not necessarily expressed directly, but was implicit in their language and

behaviour. He gives the example of a joke that was made amongst people at the mosque he frequents about Florian being a spy. Although he knew that it was a joke and told in good-humour, he felt that it revealed a subtle but pervasive belief that "there's two types of Muslims, there's the true one and the one that comes after." Florian indicates here that as a white convert, his commitment to Islam will always be questioned, even as a "joke," because he comes from a culture that does not have centuries of Islamic tradition behind it, and where Islam is still marginalised.

Liam was accused of being a spy the most often out of the participants, which could be attributed to the fact that his multilingual skills drew attention. He recounted:

> You have some who are suspicious, who ask why. Particularly in Auburn, I had some Iraqis going around saying I was a Mossad spy. Like spreading rumours around that, 'Who is this white guy?' It was very suspicious. 'Why has this white guy become a Muslim' and 'why does he speak this language, he must be working for ASIO' and there were some Indonesians saying I was with ASIO.

Liam's story highlights the oftentimes deep-rooted suspicion that some Muslims have of government agencies in Australia and overseas. Here, Liam's ability to speak multiple languages other than English, including Indonesian, Dari and Bengali, is viewed as dubious rather than praiseworthy. Liam's exhibition of his knowledge of Islam and majority Muslim cultures contradicts the notion that some Muslims hold about white converts' ignorance, which then casts suspicion on him as he seems *too* knowledgeable, even in comparison to born Muslims.

6.3.3 Glorification of whiteness

Throughout the interviews, many participants expressed that they were subject to two extreme reactions from Muslims, summed up in this quote by James used in the previous section: "On one hand, they might say '*Masha'Allah, subḥān'Allāh*, you are better than us!' and kiss your feet. And then another group of people are just waiting for you to make one wrong move so they can say, 'Aha! I told you he wasn't a real Muslim.'" These two sides of the spectrum are representative of two different but arguably related conceptualisations of whiteness that tenaciously position whiteness as oppositional to Islam. Put in another way, the idea that being a white Muslim is somehow a novel or particularly strange occurrence worthy of special praise effectively essentialises the concept of whiteness and constructs it as something indelibly unfamiliar to Islam and Muslims. However, while the construction of white converts as being inauthentic Muslims considers the barrier between whiteness and Muslimness to be insurmountable, the glorification of white converts indicates that the leap is achievable, it simply takes extraordinary levels of commitment and piety, which should be celebrated.

Belinda stated that Muslims were overwhelmingly joyful and supportive when they found out that she was Muslim, and that she had never had a single bad reaction.

> Muslims *loooove* a convert! They just love us! *laughs* You don't have to do anything, you don't have to say anything, nothing. It's just the fact that you're a revert. It's the fact that you've put aside a lot of your life to change into this religion. I find it's very inspiring for people, because people always – like a lot of people have said to me, 'Oh I've had a good hard look at myself', or 'I need to consider what I'm doing with my life, the fact that a born Aussie would choose this religion and now prays, fasts, loves it so much, has this passion for it.' Man, they're just so supportive. You can't imagine anyone being more supportive of anything.

Katherine described a similar reaction, but added that she was not as patient as others may be. When asked how people reacted to her, she said:

> Firstly just overwhelmingly positive, generally. Everyone is like, 'Oh that's so great. People really want to know, really really want to hear about it, want to talk about it, that kind of thing, to a point where it's quite frustrating. I know some converts who are really great with it, really patient, but I'm not and I kind of get sick of it really quickly and don't want to talk about it, and just want to be a Muslim and not be the convert.

Katherine added that she found that reaction problematic. Like Belinda, she recognised that she was a source of inspiration for other Muslims who felt that they should be doing more to practice their religion, in the face of someone who had taken the significant step of converting to Islam. Unlike Belinda, however, it made Katherine uncomfortable, because she felt that such a reaction assumed that converts were always going to be more pious and more devout, without examining the actual character of the person in question. While sometimes such a reaction was manifest through the implicit words and actions of the person in question, other participants discussed being directly told by other Muslims that they were "better" than them because they had changed religions. In the words of Michelle, "There's a group of people who always, no matter what, when they meet you they're like – 'Wow, you're a convert, that's so amazing. You're getting more rewards than us. You're so much better than us as a Muslim.' Which is kind of uncomfortable because it puts a lot of pressure to be the perfect Muslim and to be very devout."

A number of participants described feeling pressure to be very pious and adopt certain cultural customs, and these are explored in greater depth in section 6.4. Importantly, however, these expectations of converts are amplified due to their whiteness. They are not considered more pious simply for having chosen Islam as an adult despite being raised in another faith, but because whiteness is viewed as culturally incongruous with Islam. Participants were thus seen to

have made a larger leap, so to speak, than converts from non-white backgrounds, and were heralded as superior Muslims for that reason.

Participants like Michelle and Katherine stated that the extra attention they received because of their whiteness made them uncomfortable, because they wanted to fit in and not be seen as the convert. In contrast, Paul remarked that he would "get a kick out of" telling people that he was Muslim, and did so often in order to witness their reactions:

> It's generally happy surprise. Sometimes real, generally real joy… And then other times it's like, "Really?" There's the full gamut of things. Probably when you travel, that's the biggest one. Or when you take a taxi and the guy's from Tripoli or something. I used to take delight actually at that. Now I've realised it's kind of, just chill out. But I used to really be like, "Yeah I'm Muslim! Yeah you didn't know that, huh!" And surprise people. I'd try to show off how Muslim you are by saying "*māshāʾAllāh*" and... You know now I'm just like, whatever man. *Alḥamdulillāh*. Just try not to belittle them for not knowing or whatever.

'Joy' and 'excitement' were two emotions that commonly arose in participants' descriptions of born Muslims' reactions to hearing of their conversion. When asked why they thought people responded with such joy at meeting a convert, participants identified validation as being one of the primary causes. Indeed, the hypothesis that Muslims enjoy hearing convert stories because they validate their own belief systems was one that arose time and time again throughout the interviews. While some participants viewed it as a positive thing, like Paul, others expressed that they felt that converts' personal experiences were exploited in the process. Liam pointed out that the reaction he got when he first told another Muslim that he had converted to Islam was, "Oh great, you're the new pin up boy," a response that he actively challenged:

> I didn't have a bar of it. I was like, 'No, I'm not going up there saying all this stuff.' I'm not going to be advertising that I've become a Muslim. Because this

has been a journey between me and Allah, and it's an ongoing journey. I haven't 'arrived'.

Liam explained that his reason for resisting the role of 'pin up boy' was because he felt that Muslims had particular expectations of conversion stories which he did not meet, and he did not want to perpetuate those expectations.

> I always get this question of, 'So how did you feel when you became a Muslim?' And I'm always like, I didn't feel anything different. 'Well, what do you mean? But we hear all these stories about people who cry'… and I'm like well they might, but I had a relationship with God long before. This has been an addition, a development, a moving further onward and upward in my journey, my spiritual journey, but it didn't begin here. I didn't have some sort of magic change. It was more of an intellectual shift. So I was like, I'm not going to be the pin up boy, I'm sorry. I felt like I was going to be exploited.

In this quotation, Liam posits two reasons for his refusal to be a 'pin up boy'. Firstly, Liam emphasised that his conversion narrative did not fit the model sought by born Muslims in which there was a sudden and fundamental shift in belief and worldview in the mentality of the convert. Writing about American converts, Canadian sociologist of religion Mahdi Tourage argued that despite the complexity of conversion narratives (which I have detailed in some depth in chapter 4), the "reproduced narratives of conversion often conform to a reductive predetermined script" (Tourage 2012, p. 211). Tourage contends that the popularised conversion narratives of prominent white American convert scholars often fit these scripts – or are moulded to fit these scripts – which I argue contribute to the same expectation of all converts. Speaking of the conversion narratives of some of the most popular and influential white male Muslim scholars in America, sometimes even nicknamed as "celebrity shaykhs," Tourage (2012, p. 209) writes:

> The biographical details of Shaikh Hamza Yusuf traces the origins of his 'search for meaning' to a serious car accident and near-death head-on collision in 1977 when he was just starting Junior College (Unauthorized Biography 2011). A similar older narrative circulating among Muslims is that of Cat Stevens, a.k.a. Yusuf Islam, whose search for 'truth' began in hospital when he was very ill

with TB at the height of his fame as a pop star (Amman 2008), or according to a YouTube video in a near-death experience of drowning in the ocean (Cat Stevens' Transition to Yusuf Islam 2006). Another prominent white convert from the world of music, Imam Suhaib Webb, was introduced to Islam at the age of 19 while selling music tapes. He received a copy of the Qur'an from a Muslim man selling incense and handing out copies of the Qur'an. According to a recent article in the *LA Times*, his mother Mary Lynn Webb credits his conversion for saving him from the fate that awaited him in the rap world (Abdulrahim 2011).

It is exactly this format of conversion narrative that Liam stated was expected of him, and which he actively resists. This brings me to the second point that Liam makes, which is that he feels that born Muslims want to exploit his story in order to validate their own belief in Islam. The expectation of particular conversion narratives and performances of piety from converts in order to validate born Muslims' own commitment to Islam was a recurring theme in the interviews, and is discussed in detail in section 6.4.1. Liam additionally identified that whiteness plays a large role in the validation process:

> Every conversion is a validation. It's a justification or validation that we're right. Our community's right. And of course there's going to be a natural high or enthusiasm that a Muslim feels when they hear of someone who has – well it's interpreted as okay you've entered the faith, they've accepted Islam, what that means is "We're right." They're justifying, validating us even further…. And the first thing they wanna do is put you up there on a pulpit and preach to the world that I'm a Muslim and Islam is true. And the assumptions about white and power is that, 'Well he's white. Being a convert is a huge thing for this person to achieve, which again adds weight to our story.'

In his explanation, Liam observes that white converts are highly coveted for a variety of reasons. White people hold more power in a white supremacist society like Australia than non-white people (Hage 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2009), and white converts are thus more likely to be listened to by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. He suggests that non-white Muslims leverage the power and privilege of whiteness in order to spread the message of Islam to a larger audience. In doing so, Liam places the blame on non-white Muslims for what

he perceives to be the exploitation of his white privilege. Non-white Muslims who see him as source of validation because of his whiteness are the target of his ire, rather than the racial schemas that extol whiteness to the exclusion of other racialised identities. Indeed, as is shown later on in Chapter Seven, Liam is insistent that he doesn't have white privilege due to his low socio-economic background, while simultaneously claiming that non-white Muslims attempt to exploit the cultural capital whiteness affords him.

As well as white converts fulfilling the role of 'validators' of the religion, the perceived cultural difference between Islam and whiteness adds credence to the stories of white converts because it is assumed that they would have had to make significant lifestyle and relationship changes in order to embrace Islam, which indicates a greater mental shift, greater commitment and ultimately greater faith than a convert from a non-white background. Katherine commented on this phenomenon as well, basing her observations on the fact that whiteness is dominant in Australia. She explained that reactions from Muslims towards her have been "overwhelmingly positive… just really positive. Too positive sometimes." When asked why she thinks that is the case, she replies:

> Just validation. I think it all comes down to validation. As a vilified minority in a society, to see that someone from the dominant mainstream has rejected the dominant mainstream and come to it is kind of an affirmation of the choice to be a Muslim. And I get that. When I see other people who have converted who I really aspire to be like or think are really great, I get that. Like, "Yeah, they're a Muslim! Hah!"

Michelle was another participant who suggested that her conversion was validating for other Muslims. Michelle had been a convert for 12 years at the time of interview, and had in those 12 years been asked for her conversion story countless times by strangers. She spoke about the most recent time she had told

her conversion story in public, at an event for Islamic Awareness Week at a university:

> A lot of people came up to me afterwards to tell me that they were really inspired, and I could see people while I was talking nodding along with me and smiling, but I guess it was a much better experience for them than it was for me. And I'm happy that people got to hear my story but in a way I feel like it's not my story anymore. It's other people's story and they benefit from it more than I do. It's not something that I own anymore. It's something that I feel I'm obliged to repeat, at will, whenever I meet people. I'm kind of detached from it now, I just kind of robotically tell people, I feel really detached from it now. I don't really feel like it's my story anymore even though it is.

In this quote, Michelle explains that she had told her conversion story so many times for other Muslims' validation, it was no longer truly her story. Michelle did not frame her experiences as exploitation; however, it is this very outcome that Liam wanted to avoid when he stated that he "wanted to avoid being exploited" and avoid a situation where his personal experiences were packaged and sold to Muslims and non-Muslims alike as affirmation of the primacy and truth of Islam, precisely because it was coming from a white person.

Each of the above incidents illustrates that many Muslims in Australia perceive the identity of 'Muslim' to be a racialised one which is culturally and politically distinct from whiteness. While responses to white converts vary wildly from joy, surprise and glorification to suspicion and condescension, each of the responses documented in this section demonstrate that white converts' Muslim and convert identities are interpreted by other Muslims through the lens of their whiteness – or sometimes, perceived lack thereof. This leads Muslims that they come into contact with to view them as being 'better' Muslims for having 'left' their whiteness or 'lesser' Muslims because the indelible taint of whiteness remains.

In both situations, whether seen as 'better' or 'lesser,' their visible whiteness influences the way that Muslims respond to them, and the treatment they

receive hinges on the idea that whiteness – through its immorality, lack of culture and position of privilege in Australia – is highly detached from what it means to be Muslim in Australia. In the first scenario, white converts are viewed by Muslims as having adopted a racialised identity by converting to the racialised faith position of Muslim, and in the process having relinquished some or all of their whiteness. The extent to which they are considered racialised depends on how much they accept Islam as it is taught to them without question, and how readily they adopt certain practices, an issue which will be examined in the following section. Alternatively, other Muslims deny that white converts can ever truly be Muslim precisely because of their immersion in and attachment to whiteness, which they view as antithetical to Islam. The experiences of converts highlighted in this section thus demonstrate that just as some non-Muslims hold essentialised views of Muslims, so too do some Muslims of white Westerners; in both contexts a white convert to Islam troubles and problematizes these reified views of the Other and in turn, the Self.

6.4 Expectations Regarding Converts' Practice

A common form of engagement with other Muslims described by participants was the pressure to conform to narrow modes or expressions of Islam which were determined by those who were raised Muslim and from non-white backgrounds. Most participants explained that following their introduction to the Muslim community, they soon encountered a number of expectations from Muslims with regards to their practice of the religion. These expectations were in keeping with the notion expressed in earlier sections that white converts were required to forego their whiteness in order to be an acceptable 'Muslim,' wherein 'Muslim' is a racialised category for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Experiences amongst participants differed with regards to what the expectations were and to the level of pressure they felt to adopt certain practices, however many participants mentioned that the expectations they encountered were "cultural" rather than "Islamic"; in other words, the expectations emerged from ethnocultural traditions or practices rather than being a religious imperative.

Prior to analysing the expectations that converts faced from the Muslim community, it should be acknowledged that a handful of participants stated they had not felt any notable pressure from other Muslims. Belinda, for example, remarked that to the contrary, the Muslims she had met since her conversion had encouraged her to take her time and ease into the practice of Islam, stating:

> It was a very easy process for me and everyone was very supportive…. Thank God they were so supportive. They were – like nothing. When I said, 'I'd like to learn to pray' they were like, 'Okay good, I'll get someone to help you.' I kept saying, 'I should be putting on ḥijāb by now,' they were like, 'Take your time, do whatever, it's a process.'

Similarly, Katherine recalled in her interview that the first Muslim she contacted after she converted told her to start praying as soon as possible, as that was compulsory for her, but to take her time with everything else. These experiences were in the minority, however, with most participants relating at least one or two instances where they felt pressure to conform to particular standards.

6.4.1 The performance of piety

One of the key expectations revealed by my thematic analysis of the qualitative data was the expectation that converts would be exceptionally pious, practising and religious. Most of the participants who raised this as a common expectation

from born Muslims clarified that they felt the pressure was greater for white converts because they were viewed as having taken a bigger step in converting than someone from a non-white background. Participants felt that they were subject to expectations that they would very quickly become knowledgeable about the religion, and some also expressed that they felt some Muslims would have liked them to become religious scholars. In Edward's experience, he felt this pressure most with his wife's family:

> Yeah, I think that's true for most Muslims, that they have an expectation of how you will practise your religion, for sure. And more so for me because not soon after I converted I got married, and obviously my wife's family then also had a very clear sort of perception in terms of how I should practise my religion as well… It's – there's a lot of information, like spiritual and religious information, and there was I think a real push for me to A) learn Arabic, and B) really immerse myself in the religious studies. To learn more about the religion.

This same pressure was also felt by Liam, who recounted an incident involving his father-in-law in Indonesia:

> He said something like, you're a revert, we expect you to do this 100% right. If I skip a daily prayer that's one thing, but for you it's not acceptable, okay. You're a revert. Everyone expects you to do it properly. For me it doesn't matter. I was like – you hypocrite. And I blasted him back. I said you hypocrite, don't give me that. That's rubbish.

The double standards apparent in exchanges such as the one above illustrate once again that there is an added pressure on white converts to prove themselves as Muslim to other Muslims who are sceptical of their ability to fully shed their whiteness in favour of Islam.

Other white converts who participated in this project also had their authenticity as Muslims challenged because they were not performing Islam to the standard expected of them. Michelle was one of these participants, who

suggested that the way born Muslims responded to her changed depending on whether she was or was not wearing a headscarf. Michelle states:

> I met someone, like a friend of a friend, and he was like so, are you really Muslim? And I was really offended, cos I was thinking, well, I've been struggling in this for twelve years and I've been trying my best for twelve years, so I just felt like, who are you to ask me if I'm really Muslim? Are YOU really Muslim? How much do you practise your *dīn*? Just because I'm white and I don't wear the scarf doesn't mean anything, cos a lot of these people do a lot of other *ḥarām* in public and think it's ok.

In this quotation, Michelle identifies two reasons for why the acquaintance questioned whether she was "really Muslim" – her whiteness, and the fact that she did not wear a headscarf. Michelle's follow-up comment – "a lot of these people do a lot of other *ḥarām* in public and think it's ok" indicates that Michelle believes that the two reasons are connected. It is not simply that Michelle does not wear a headscarf, but that she does not wear a headscarf and *also is white*. Michelle states that "these people" – non-white Muslims who question her authenticity as a Muslim – do the very same thing that they accuse her of doing, which is committing sin in public, but observes that their behaviour is viewed as acceptable by themselves and other non-white Muslims because their legitimacy as a Muslim is not in question. In order to prove herself as a Muslim, Michelle believes that she is expected to perform her Muslim identity to a greater extent, and demonstrate a higher level of piety, than her non-white counterparts.

The excerpt from Michelle's interview raises a number of issues pertinent to the aims of this thesis. Here, Michelle's perceived non-performance of a Muslim identity is cause for some non-Muslims to query her commitment to the faith. In his article about the fetishisation of prominent white converts to Islam, Tourage explains that in Islamic theology, to become a Muslim simply requires one to recite the testament of faith, but that to be a "believer" requires more

than simply the "specific knowledge of God" (2012, p. 210) but also requires an outward expression of that same faith. Tourage cites Murata and Chittick to clarify further that *ʾimān* involves a "knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs" (Murata and Chittick, cited in Tourage 2012, p. 208). In other words, Islam or its closest translation in English, "submission to God," requires submission not just in terms of acknowledging God, but also submission through speech and action. In this context, it could be argued that Michelle's legitimacy as a Muslim is questioned solely because of the perceived lack of action, in this case specifically the donning of the headscarf, and that her whiteness has little to do with it. However, it is clear that Michelle attributes the special scrutiny of her actions to the fact that she is white, based on the fact that other, non-white Muslim's performance or non-performance of faith is not criticised like hers is. In other words, she feels that for non-white Muslims it is enough for them to say that they are Muslim and that their religion is Islam for them to be accepted by other non-white Muslims as Muslim, whereas white converts are held to a much higher standard.

The experiences and observations of Michelle, Edward and Liam are supported by the work of Tourage, who writes about what he terms the "fetishisation" of white, predominantly male, American Muslim convert scholars (2012). Tourage persuasively argues that "immigrant Muslims" (which he uses here as a synonym for born Muslims) fetishise white converts' performance of belief as a commodity which they harness to represent their (born Muslims) own belief. As noted above, Tourage acknowledges that it is not the performance of belief itself which is at issue here, given that in Islam performativity of faith is a precondition to belief. What Tourage does raise concerns about is the tendency of born Muslims to glorify the hyper-performativity of belief as practised by white converts, which then act as signifiers of belief for themselves. He

contends that this phenomenon is due to the effect of white supremacy and colonialism on the mentality of the immigrant Muslim who begins to see him or herself as inferior to white people, observing that:

> The whiteness of converts is fetishized as a commodity that circulates within the externalized system of the signification of belief. Presumably born-Muslims could find externalized embodiments of belief in themselves or in any other pious Muslim, but social and historical factors such as racist and or colonial attitudes that immigrant Muslims have internalized contribute to the American converts' function of being signifiers of Islamic belief in this specific context (Tourage 2012, p. 222).

In light of Tourage's conclusions, it is arguable that non-white born Muslims expect white converts like Michelle to hyper-perform their belief, in the hope that their performance will then act as a signifier and stand-in for the born Muslims' own belief. In Michelle's interview, she identifies the headscarf and modest clothing as one of the primary expectations that born Muslims have of her, a sentiment which was verbalised by other female participants as well and which is explored in detail in section 6.4.2. Tourage identifies a number of other examples as well, suggesting that "The prominent converts hyper-perform their belief when they display a superior knowledge of Islam and Arabic or when their scripted pre-Islamic background and conversion narratives along with outward signifiers of their 'muslimness' are routinely rehearsed" (2012, p. 222). He also borrows from the work of Marcia Hermansen, who writes about her experiences and observations of the forms of acceptable performance of Muslim identity within Muslim communities in America. Paraphrasing Hermansen, Tourage states:

> Examples include visibly 'Muslim' public appearances, pious gestures, 'Islamic' items of clothing, marrying 'brown' women and having many children, and the use of what Hermensen [sic] calls 'Islam-speak' (2004: 392). Commenting on Muslims' 'performing' Islam Awareness Week on university campuses, Hermensen [sic] observes: '… non-verbal elements such as costume and gesture function as much to persuade as do actual verbal utterances'; and she adds:

'one's visible identity and actions warrant the acceptance of the claims to Islamic authority that are made through the performance' (Tourage 2012, p. 212).

In these examples, the greater the performance, the more secure born Muslims are that their belief is externalised through the converts' practices and conversion narratives. According to Tourage, immigrant Muslims do not feel the same need to hyper-perform their belief because they are already confident that they belong in the cultural space of Islam, whereas white converts are required to prove their allegiance and in a sense "earn their keep" by acting as conduits for born Muslims when they are seeking a spiritual boost. White converts like Michelle are seen as a disappointment to these Muslims because they are not fulfilling the role that is expected of them by hyper-performing belief.

While Tourage's claims are persuasive, there is little in the interview data from the current research project that supports the argument that non-white 'born' Muslims demand the hyper-performativity of belief from white converts because of their internalised racism or colonial mindset. Of course, without interviewing non-white Muslims themselves it is difficult to make an assessment of Tourage's argument one way or the other. However, based on the reports provided by the white converts I interviewed it seems more likely that white converts are expected to "prove themselves" far more regularly and more convincingly because of the perception that the cultural distance between whiteness and Islam is so great – perhaps almost insurmountable - that greater conviction and commitment to the faith needs to be demonstrated in order to be believable as legitimate Muslims. This is linked to the notion that Islam is racialised as non-white, even by some non-white Muslims themselves.

The expectation of performative piety is arguably even more potent when we look at the experiences of women converts specifically. In Michelle's case, her

non-conformity to the expectations that born Muslims had of her as a convert woman meant that she opened herself up to scrutiny from members of the Muslim community who questioned her legitimacy as a Muslim. Michelle suggests that the scrutiny is gendered as well, with women held to a higher standard of devoutness in order to demonstrate their modesty and piety. Michelle explains that she feels this sentiment underlies her Muslim friends' expectation of her to marry again: she distinctly feels a pressure to continually prove that she is a "good" Muslim woman:

> I think particularly for me as well, because I'm divorced and I have been married, people really expected me to get married again, to kind of prove that I was still a 'good girl' or whatever. Or to prove that I wasn't going to run away or become a non-Muslim, or any of those things. So I think that there was an expectation that I would do that.

An intersectional approach to the question of why this is the case suggests that the expectation that white converts consistently prove their commitment to Islam and corresponding disavowal of whiteness is compounded by an expectation that women be the "keepers of the culture" (Billson 1995) in marginalised communities, as has been argued by feminist scholars studying racialised minority communities in the United States, Malaysia and Britain (Gongaware 2003; Le Espiritu 2001; Mohammad 1999; Sankar 2015). Le Espiritu posits that the maintenance of culture amongst immigrant communities not only acts as "a lifeline to the home country and a basis for group identity in a new country, it is also a base from which immigrants stake their political and sociocultural claims on their new country" (2001, p. 415). Women, Le Espiritu and others argue, are conceptualised as the carriers of tradition within immigrant communities who attempt to maintain their cultural traditions and cultural ties in the face of assimilation and homogenisation. Forms of cultural maintenance in these circumstances range from roles in the domestic sphere

such as food preparation, to maintaining strong social ties with family in their homeland and other members of the immigrant community.

Michelle's case is of course significantly different to the stories described by Le Espiritu, as the women I interviewed weren't from racialised minority backgrounds like the Filipina people Le Espiritu spoke to. However, the idea that in such minority communities women are often seen as the bearers of cultural tradition provides some insights to understanding the experiences of Michelle and other white convert women who described feeling that there was an expectation that white Muslim women in particular needed to prove themselves to be "good Muslims" through their performance of certain Islamic practices such as wearing *ḥijāb*. Women are expected to carry the extra burden of being responsible for the cultural maintenance of Islam in a context where Islam and Muslims are marginalised. This can be seen in the work of Robina Mohammad, a feminist geographer from Brunei. Through her research on Pakistani women living in Britain, Mohammad found that the marginalisation of Pakistani-British Muslims "strengthened the need for a 'group' identity, narratives of collective identity that make women central to the group, and regulatory practices that restrict women in a variety of ways" (1999, p. 236). In other words, women carry the responsibility for ensuring that their culture and faith is maintained and conserved, in the face of external forces seeking to assimilate them into the overarching British culture. This theory can also be applied to white converts in Australia; as demonstrated in this subsection, some Muslims may expect white converts to "carry" the faith. The burden falls mostly on female converts, as women in marginalised groups are given the responsibility of being the maintainers of the culture and faith. This is also evident in expectations of women's clothing, explored earlier in section 6.2.2.

Similar arguments have been made by Marcia Hermansen for why the performance of piety is so integral to the construction of a religious Muslim identity in America, and she notes that marginalised people within the minority group (such as women) may feel greater pressure to assert their legitimacy in the "imagined Muslim space" through the performance of piety:

> I think the emphasis on performance in dialogue among Muslims in America is partly due to their need not only to assert some sort of authority over an imagined Muslim space but to claim both the authority and the space. This partly reflects how oppressed a minority tends to feel and also their need to assert a claim to a position. Other groups within the broader minority also, may feel oppressed, those whose claim to authority may be rejected or marginalized, such as women, non-Sunnis, women without *ḥijāb*, and so on, for as noted, many Islamist expressions of this authority are at the same time totalizing and exclusionary in nature (2004, p. 392).

Michelle's quotation also reinforces the idea explored in section 6.2.2 that Islam and whiteness are mutually exclusive because whiteness and Western culture are rooted in immorality. White converts thus need to prove themselves to be extra pious and religious in order to overcome this association. In this narrative, white Westerners – and particularly white convert women - are perceived to be inherently irreligious, and it is assumed that given the chance, they will revert to un-Islamic practices. Michelle's story highlights the ways in which gender is implicated and utilised in the racialisation of Muslims by Muslims who view whiteness as being fundamentally oppositional to Islam.

In this section, I have drawn attention to how the expectation of religious piety is deployed by born Muslims as a way to ascertain and measure white converts' commitment to the religion. Tourage has argued that the expectation of white converts to hyper-perform their belief arises from the fetishisation of white converts by born Muslims who use the converts' performance of the faith as a signifier for their own faith in specific contexts such as the United States of

America. My data cannot confirm Tourage's claims, as like him, I have not interviewed non-white Muslims. Instead, my data suggests that the greater expectation of piety placed upon the white convert over the born Muslim emanates from the belief that whiteness is so disparate from Islam that white converts need to prove more strongly and with greater conviction that they have truly crossed over to "the other side." The racialisation of Islam that this perspective relies upon is further compounded by gender – women are perceived to be the carriers of culture and so there is a specific emphasis on women "proving" that they are not immoral (as I explored in section 6.2.2) by wearing *ḥijāb,* marrying early or remarrying if they had gone through a divorce, or adopting another culture's behaviours and practices as evidence of her disavowal of her white Australian culture.

6.4.2 Clothing

While Katherine and Belinda both indicated that they had never felt pressured by other Muslims to start wearing a headscarf, as stated in the introduction of this section, other participants, particularly women, stated that in some settings they felt judged and looked down upon for not dressing in a particular way. Lisa stated that after she stopped wearing *ḥijāb*, some of her Muslim acquaintances and colleagues didn't know how to react around her, even though they themselves may not have worn *ḥijāb* or other visibly Muslim clothing.

> And when I took off my scarf, people were really careful with me and they almost treated me as if I wasn't really Muslim anymore. That I'd just decided not to be Muslim. After a while it obviously became apparent that it wasn't so, but a lot of people didn't know how to react to that.

Belinda, who works at an organisation that supports and educates other Muslim converts, remarked that although she did not feel pressure to adopt the headscarf herself, exposure to the community has changed her perception:

But now I realise, the community does have a big expectation. People go up to me and they say, for example, a month ago, "My sister-in-law reverted a week ago and she's still wearing singlet tops," as though it's the worst thing in the world… Reverts come to me all the time and they say, "Oh I was with this crowd, and they told me 'Why are you still wearing make up after three weeks? Why don't you have *ḥijāb* on after three weeks?'" … Now I see that it is bad. It's very bad. I think people prey on reverts.

It is evident by these quotations that just as Muslim women's dress is perceived to be an important and racialised marker of Muslim identity to non-Muslims, as discussed in section 5.2.1, so too is it considered an indicator of faith for Muslims. With regards to clothing, it is clear that women felt more pressure than men to adopt a different dress code. Most female participants who wore a headscarf stated that they did do so out of religious obligation, but some added that amongst some ethnocultural groups they felt it was a cultural expectation as well, and that as white women they felt more pressure to prove their loyalty to the faith. Indeed, the *ḥijāb* in particular (as opposed to loose, modest clothing in general) is imbued with racialised political overtones, which marks the wearer as someone who has given allegiance to Islam. In the case of white converts, this allegiance is constantly questioned by Muslims who perceive their whiteness to be a barrier to a full and complete conversion to Islam. Thus, whereas a non-white Muslim woman removing her *ḥijāb* may be negatively judged by other Muslims who perceive her to be breaking an important commandment of Islam, a white convert woman removing *ḥijāb* lays herself open to having her faith and commitment to Islam questioned. Again, this can partly be attributed to Mohammed's assertion that "narratives of group identity make women central to the processes through which group identity is constructed" (1999, p. 222), leading to the expectation that women be responsible for the maintenance of culture and faith within a marginalised group.

This same expectation with regards to dress was not felt as strongly by male participants, although some of them did choose to start wearing particular articles of clothing such as the *kufi* or *thawb* without being asked to do so explicitly. Edward stated that while he did not feel substantial pressure himself, he did feel that there was a general expectation that was directed towards converts, especially in religious spaces:

> I think that there is an expectation more generally that you dress modestly. Certainly I had comments, you get comments from people randomly at mosques and whatever else in terms of the way that you dress. But as a general rule, no not really. Cos I generally think I dressed quite sensibly, so not particularly.

In contrast, Daniel explains that the Muslim social groups he socialised with at the time took the contrary approach to Muslim clothing, and discouraged him from dressing in a visibly Muslim way.

> The particular religious group I was with during that time, they had the opposite in that they didn't want to look too Muslim, in particular because their justification was that they saw beards and turbans and *niqāb* as an impediment towards *da'wah*, so leave that towards a later, not very articulated well point in the future, that will be fine. Going out, if I went out with my non-existent *abaya* and turban it would cause a problem with these guys, so they usually stopped me from doing that. In terms of clothing.

The above excerpt indicates that while the Muslims Daniel socialised with acknowledged the importance of religious clothing, they eschewed this clothing in order to practise *'da'wah'* or 'invitation to Islam.' These articles of clothing are seen as an impediment towards drawing people to Islam in the Australian context, precisely because they are viewed as foreign and alien to the Australian way of life and to whiteness. At worst, observably Muslim items of clothing locate the wearer as a "threat" to this way of life; as noted by Humphrey (2007, p. 11), physical signs of religiosity such as *ḥijāb*, *abayas*, and beards are "readily politicised" and "suspected as being surface manifestations of a deeper hidden threat." Humphrey describes these markers of religion as being 'culturalised,' a

term which he uses instead of 'racialised,' claiming that within the secular modernity of the West, Islam and Muslims are constructed as being culturally incompatible with and even oppositional to the West.

The findings discussed in this section support the idea that the performance of Islamic piety – in this case, through clothing that identifies one as a Muslim - is considered by some Muslims to be a set of racialised behaviours that can ground the white converts more firmly in the category of 'Muslim.' Additionally, unlike non-white Muslims whose Muslimness can be more readily accepted because they 'look' Muslim simply *as a result* of their physical appearance, there is a greater expectation on white converts to use visible markers of clothing to identify themselves as Muslims *despite* their physical appearance. Visible markers of their Muslim identity reinforce the perception of their commitment not just to the faith, but to the community as a whole, and identify the wearer as a bearer of the Islamic tradition and a keeper of the Islamic culture – a responsibility that is most often placed on the shoulders of women, as I examined in the previous section.

6.4.3 Name changes

Another common expectation for participants was pressure to change their names from their birth names to a more "Muslim" sounding name, which in all cases meant an Arabic name. Interestingly, expectations around names differed drastically between participants, and seemed to largely be influenced by the time of their conversion. Participants who had converted more than twenty years ago all had Arabic names, whereas participants who converted more recently were likely to have kept their birth names. Salwa, for example, who converted in the 1980s, had taken on her husband's Arabic surname at

marriage, and also changed her first name at her husband's request. "He had a bit of a thing about - he didn't like Anglo names, he didn't think it went with his surname. So he wanted to change it so I said, 'Okay, well change it.' He chose my name. So that was it. So I changed it legally by registration." Salwa appears ambivalent about this fact in her interview, indicating that she did not feel strongly either way, but that she was happy to do so if it made her husband happy.

Paul explains that there have been waves of opinion about this particular issue across geography and time. Although he converted ten years ago, at a time when in Australia it was much more acceptable to keep your birth name, the social groups that he moved in internationally had a different perspective and he felt pressured to change his name – and did, temporarily:

> But the convert culture was such that you should change your name. There was a big group of influential Muslims from the Norwich community in the UK, people like Abdullah Ze, Paul Sanders, Abdul Lateef Whiteman. So all these guys, they were all changing their names. That was I think the prevailing Western Muslim culture I think, for a lot of the sectors that I was involved in.

Ali, who converted in the early 1990s, explained that at the time he was under immense pressure from the Muslim community to change his name. Unlike Salwa, who did not express any regrets about it, Ali is clearly resentful about the pressure he was under, and states that if he could go back in time he would not change it:

> And I think the underlying message that these people were trying to send was, your old self – nup, not good enough. And at the time I went along with it, because it was the done thing. Every time I think about it I get pissed off all over again. Cos now obviously I know there's, Islam doesn't say you have to change your name, but I've had this name for 20 years so. It's too late to do anything about it.

Similarly, Paul explained that he feels that the changing of name indicates a 'throwing away' of what he once was, which for him was a negative and

inappropriate reaction. He explained that this started even before he had converted:

> The very first time I went to Lakemba Mosque, which was quite an intimidating experience. The very first time I walked in, the second person that spoke to me – this was a long way from when I actually became a Muslim and said shahada – this random brother goes, 'Brother have you thought of what your Muslim name will be?" Like that's what you want to say to me? Before I even know what the faith is about? It's the worst thing you can say. It's like saying, what you were was no good and you should *khalas*, throw that away.

Both Paul and Ali articulated that they felt the pressure to change their names operated to construct their pre-Muslim lives, cultures, identities and histories as corrupt or valueless. In a post-conversion context, their birth names represented a white identity that Muslims felt were incompatible with Islam, and thus should be discarded after conversion. They commented that while they were uncomfortable with that characterisation, they felt that they did not have the understanding at the time to defend their decision not to change their name. Paul states that he did change his name temporarily due to the high levels of pressure he received from non-white Muslims, but that he changed it back soon after.

Many of the converts who participated who had converted more recently stated that they did not feel notable pressure to change their names, and if they did they felt able to withstand the pressure easily. This could in part be related to the ability to easily and efficiently access information about Islam via the Internet, a quick search of which demonstrates that changing one's name to an Arabic name is not required in the Islamic faith. Another possible factor is the growth in numbers of white converts to Islam in Sydney over the last two decades, which may mean that white converts feel more empowered and supported to insist on keeping their birth names in the face of pressure to adopt an "ethnic" culture. For example, when asked what expectations he

encountered as a convert, Daniel immediately responds with "changing my name," but adds that he has only ever encountered this expectation once, when he met someone at a talk who asked him what his "quote unquote Islamic name" was. Daniel replied by repeating his name, after which the man "kind of got it." Daniel's refusal to change his name originates from a conscious decision to resist what he calls "assimilat[ing] other cultures". Daniel takes a firm position to counter the notion that Islam and white are somehow mutually exclusive or incompatible. His rejection of the commonly expressed idea that white converts need to adopt certain cultural practices in order to be considered a 'proper' Muslim is explored in more depth in Chapter Seven. Omar also remarked upon the fact that it was something that was "recommended" to him as a religious requirement by "Tablighi uncles", but he later found out that it was "something that Muslims did culturally… it's not even recommended in Islam." Omar adds, "They made it sound like, like you had to. That it was something so that Allah can speak to you on the Day of Judgement. What, so Allah can't speak to me on the Day of Judgement if I have a white name?" Like Ali, Omar remarks that he would not encourage other converts to do the same, stating: "I accepted it at the time but having thought about it later, it's quite a confronting thing and not something I agree with."

On the other hand, some converts choose to change their names of their own accord. The reasons they volunteered were contrary to the concerns expressed by Paul and Ali, who indicated that they felt their previous identities were viewed by others as being unable to coexist with their new Muslim identity because of the perceived distance between whiteness, exemplified in their birth names, and a racialised image of Islam. Instead, some converts explained that changing their name was a way for them to embrace their new identity precisely because they felt that their previous, birth name did not represent

their identity adequately anymore. When asked why she had decided to change her name despite being informed by other Muslims that she did not need to for religious purposes, Fatima stated: "A lot of it was my new identity, I just felt like a different person. I felt like my last name just didn't fit anymore. I wanted to change it especially to something Islamic because I thought that suited better, rather than my old ethnic name – Anglo name." Fatima's name change symbolised for her a fresh start with a new identity, which enabled her to be able to start to shed her "old" white identity faster. Her acknowledgement of the fact that her "old ethnic name" did not "fit" with her new identity reinforces the idea that whiteness and Muslimness are somehow incompatible and not quite "suited" to one another.

In Moosavi's article on British Muslim converts' performance of "authentic Muslimness," as he terms it, Moosavi indicates that many of the converts he interviewed expressed a similar view to Fatima. One of his participants stated that it was "like being born again;" others said they wanted to be a "new person" or a "different person" (2012, p. 112). Moosavi suggests that while some changed their names for the affective implications of it with regards to how they felt about themselves, for other converts, changing their name allowed them to eventually be accepted as a Muslim. Moosavi concludes that oftentimes changing their name to a non-English name was vital to converts being able to "pass" as authentic Muslims (2012).

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter makes important empirical contributions to the scholarship on conversion to Islam by focusing on the racialised experiences of white Muslim converts within the Muslim community. As I highlighted in Chapter Four,

much of the literature on Muslim converts fails to adequately attend to the issue of Muslim converts' interactions with members of their local and sometimes extended Muslim community, focusing instead on their engagement with broader society. This chapter has not only centred the Muslim-Muslim relationship in these interactions, which is a notable absence in previous literature, but emphasises the racialised nature of these interactions, an aspect of conversion that has only very recently begun to attract consideration in the field (Moosavi 2014; 2015, Galonnier 2015). This thesis thus contributes an Australian perspective to the British experience studied by Moosavi, and the American and French experiences that Galonnier documents.

While there is a growing body of literature about the racialisation of Muslims as a 'non-white Other' from the perspective of the West, as I have outlined in section 2.2, there have been far fewer studies about how Muslims perceive the West, and how they perceive and position themselves in relation to the West and to whiteness. This chapter was unable to adequately address that gap, as my interviews were solely with white Muslims and not with Muslims who identified as non-white, leaving an avenue for further research. However, what this chapter *has* uncovered is that participants felt that their perceived racial identity had a substantial impact on how they were treated and responded to by non-white Muslims, an area that has not been attended to significantly by the works of Moosavi and Galonnier. Participants indicated that just as non-Muslims struggled to make sense of the figure of the white Muslim because of the perceived dichotomy between whiteness and Islam, Muslims too reified the same binary by taking a narrow and racialised view of Islam which gave rise to specific expectations of performance. The realisation that their perceived whiteness influenced the response they received from other Muslims often made participants cognisant of the racialised frames that they and other

Muslims had to negotiate. However, the racialised frames that were identified in this chapter are distinct from those identified in Chapter Five: Leaving Whiteness, in which I examined how in interactions with non-Muslims, the racialisation of Muslims served to construct Muslims as a threat to the Australian nation, harsh and rigid, and oppressive to women. In contrast, in the interactions with Muslims documented in this chapter, it was *whiteness* that was instead often the focus of critique: alternatingly viewed as undeservedly powerful, exploitative and greedy, immoral, and culturally and spiritually bankrupt, in contradiction to Muslims' views about Islam.

This chapter has demonstrated that while a number of the interactions recounted by participants indicated that some Muslims viewed the disparity between whiteness and Islam as being virtually insurmountable and treated white converts with suspicion and distrust as a result, other stories illustrated that some Muslims felt that the divide between Islam and whiteness was great, but not indomitable, and enthusiastically celebrated converts for achieving the near impossible. Other interactions involved non-white Muslims attempting to assimilate the white convert into their own culture by strongly encouraging and sometimes pressuring them to adopt certain cultural traditions and customs – indicating that they too felt their whiteness was a barrier, but one that could be overcome by assuming racialised characteristics in the form of clothing and names. In the following chapter, I examine in more detail how the racialised encounters with Muslims and non-Muslims documented in Chapters Five and Six influenced participants' conceptualisations of race, whiteness and their own racial identity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REFLECTIONS ON RACE

7.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters of this thesis, I critically analysed a range of racialised exchanges related by participants to underscore the fact that race plays a direct and pivotal role in the lives of white converts to Islam. The interactions offered by participants in their interviews illustrate that the existence of white Muslim converts can both reinforce *and* disrupt the racialised frames through which non-Muslims and non-white Muslims view themselves and each other, sometimes simultaneously. In the context of a national imaginary in which Australianness, whiteness, Christianity and secularism coalesce into one amorphous and professedly culturally neutral identity, the decision of a white person to convert to the Islam is viewed as an acutely politicised and racialised act. Conversions to Islam by white people thus inspire a kaleidoscope of oftentimes visceral reactions from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While Chapters Five and Six focused on the expression of these reactions towards the white Muslim converts interviewed, as the participants themselves interpreted them, this chapter centres on how the recorded exchanges impacted on participants' sense of belonging within Australia, and on their self-characterisation of their whiteness and racial identity before and after their conversion to Islam.

Chapter Seven thus endeavours to draw attention back onto the voices of white converts to Islam. At first glance, the suggestion to re-centre the voices of white

people may seem a strange task for a project that seeks to challenge the hegemony of whiteness and the trajectory of modernity that bound whiteness with Christian-coded secularism at the centre of European, and now Australian, visions of itself. Writing almost two decades ago, Ghassan Hage said of whiteness that, "Its new visibility is in a sense a mark of the decrease in its hegemonic power" (1998, p. x). It is yet to be seen whether the emergence of whiteness studies as a field of study in academia has indeed heralded the demise of white supremacy, or whether the attention on white people's experiences of whiteness has simply reasserted the centrality of whiteness in studies of race. It is my belief, however, that reversing the analytical gaze onto white people – by making them the object of study, taking the lead of writers and scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and bell hooks - can disrupt the normalisation and naturalisation of whiteness, thereby "making whiteness strange" (Dyer 1997).

As the final discussion chapter, this chapter thus returns to the overarching research question that guides this thesis: how do white converts to Islam experience race and negotiate their racial identity after conversion? Chapter Seven begins by detailing participants' perspectives on whiteness and the racial repertoires they employed when talking about their whiteness, drawing on the matrix of racial repertoires offered by American sociologist Ruth Frankenberg in her seminal work, "White Women; Race Matters" (1993). Although Frankenberg's work is by now somewhat dated, it has nonetheless provided a useful foundation for the empirical study of white identities, and has informed studies of whiteness in Britain (Bonnett 1997; Clark & Garner 2009), the United States of America (Eichstedt 2001, Hartmann et al 2009; Lipsitz 2005; Roediger 1999), Hong Kong (Leonard 2008; 2010) and Australia (Durie 2003; Lobo & Morgan 2012). Section 7.2 examines the diverse ways in which participants

talked about race, drawing on interview data to analyse the wide range of attitudes to whiteness and race expressed by participants. In the following section, I shift my attention to the narratives of participants who indicated that their conversion had an influence on how they perceived themselves racially. Finally, I closely examine two concepts that are raised in the interviews that reflect a change in participants' racial identities: the notion of 'belonging' and the notion of 'culture,' both concepts which feature prominently in the interview data, and evoke race in less direct ways - often through the idea of nation and 'Australianness' instead.

7.2 White Identities

Until now, this thesis has focused on analysing how the white identities of participants' shaped the way that other people responded to, talked to and otherwise treated them as Muslim converts. In this section, I examine how the white converts I interviewed conceptualised whiteness themselves, and the racial repertoires they employed when describing how they perceived their identities prior to and after conversion. In section 2.4 of this thesis, I introduced the work of Ruth Frankenberg, whose interviews with 30 white women in the United States led her to develop a model of three discursive repertoires that she believed encapsulated the forms that the narratives of her interview participants took (1993, p. 14), and which in this chapter I will refer to as racial repertoires. The first of these is what Frankenberg termed "essentialist racism." Frankenberg defines essentialist racism as "a discourse that views race as a marker of ontological, essential, or biological difference" (1993, p. 139) and that positions race as being a biological determinant of not just difference, but of superiority and inferiority. Like the subjects of Frankenberg's research, none of

my participants articulated their own understanding of race explicitly through this frame. Essentialist racist repertoires advanced through reference to immutable biological factors were largely absent from the interview data, except in some rare cases where participants related something that had been said to them by someone else. This is not an unusual finding given the marked decline of the use of the language of 'race' in public discourse in the United States, Australia and Europe in the 'post-racial era' (Bonilla-Silva 2014, Jayasuriya 1995, Lentin 2015), and an increase in the language of 'culture' (Lentin 2015). Indeed, this is a phenomenon that arose in the interviews, as though 'race' language was not employed, participants did allude to the idea that certain *cultures* may provide better platforms through which to practice Islam than others (explored in more detail in section 7.5).

The second and third racial repertoires featured frequently, however. Frankenberg terms the second frame, "colour and power evasion," describing the tendency of many of her interview subjects to claim that they did not see colour, or that they were colour blind – "colour dodging," as Frankenberg names it (1993, p. 142). The "power" part of colour and power evasion arises when people selectively engage with colour; for example, they may refer to racial differences amongst groups in some contexts, but do not acknowledge the differences in power between those racial groups. The final repertoire that Frankenberg identifies is "race cognisance," which entails an understanding of how difference has come to be racialised. Like racist essentialism, race cognisance looks to the racial differences between groups, but unlike racist essentialism, difference is characterised in "historical, political, social, or cultural terms rather than essentialist ones" (1993, p. 157).

Consistent with the findings of Frankenberg's research, the participants of this project employed the second and third discursive repertoires in their interviews

in almost equal proportions. Interview data demonstrates that the converts who participated in this project had varying levels of racial cognisance before their conversion. Most participants stated in their interviews that they were aware of being white prior to their conversion, however their descriptions of what it meant to be white varied widely. A third of these participants explained that whiteness to them was just about their skin colour, and that even though they knew they were white, it was not something that they thought about beyond how it was reflected in their appearance. Variations of statements like "it's only a skin colour" and "it's just about how I look" were common amongst these participants, often accompanied with statements such as "I've never really thought about it." In the words of Florian, "It means to belong to a group of people who have fair skin colour, in comparison with others who have darker or different tone of skin colour, or different features. Basically, different from Asian, African, or Arabs."

The physical aspect of whiteness was emphasised in many of these interviews, but downplayed as an insignificant or superficial aspect of who they were, through the repeated use of the term "just" and "only" – "it's *just* about how I look," or "it's *only* a skin colour." Participants who confined whiteness to physical appearance were more likely to state that being white was not a significant part of their identity, or one that they reflected on or thought about. While not colour evasive, this approach demonstrated a form of power evasion, whereby perceptible racial differences were not linked in their minds to material and structural inequalities.

A far smaller number of participants expressed that whiteness was related to their ethnic background, ancestral heritage and culture. In answer to the question "What does it mean to be white?" Michael answered with, "It's who you are, who your parents are, how you look… maybe what kind of clothes you

wear, food, that sort of thing." Stephanie explained that her knowledge of her whiteness stemmed from her German ethnicity, laughingly stating, "German is as white as you can get… our food is even whiter than English food, it is so bland." For Paul, white culture was "something you can't really put your finger on," but that was apparent through popular culture representations of whiteness:

> Me and my wife will watch Nazeem's [Hussain] 'Legally Brown' [SBS comedy show] and you know the blog, Stuff White People Like, and I completely laugh at some of the things. Like that's so true - I dunno, like organic farmers' markets, and driving through the Shire and you sometimes see some of the really white dudes with flags, and I'm not saying just the boganism but... there's that real, there's a certain spirit or love of the nation. I dunno, there's all these clichés like beach culture. It's blurry but it makes me smile most of the time. I don't reject any of that.

In the above quote, Paul acknowledges that the aspects of white culture that he finds endearing and "makes [him] smile" are also ones that are lampooned in the pop culture examples he gives, and that he himself can laugh at precisely because he recognised the kernels of truth in those representations. Additionally, he notes that in Australia, whiteness is also associated with a "love of the nation," which he admitted he found gratifying. However, Paul was careful to distance himself from what he terms "the real nationalism," later adding, "I reject obviously the boganism, and the jingoism of like – the real nationalism or whatever." In doing so, Paul exhibited an understanding that expressions of love for white culture and white identity can and have had negative connotations and ramifications attached to them.

Paul's interview is illuminating because it demonstrates how participants such as Paul could simultaneously recognise racialised hierarchies of power while also evading an acknowledgement of the consequences of the imbalance. His attitudes towards nationalism are similarly mixed, expressing that whiteness

entails a "spirit or love of the nation" that he does not reject, but that he does reject "the real nationalism." He distinguishes his own feelings of nationalism from "boganism," referring to a derogatory Australian slang word for someone who is perceived to be from a working class background or of otherwise low social status. In Sydney, where this research was carried out, the term bogan often carries the implication that the person that the term is directed to is perceived as white, although this is not always the case. For example, Pini, McDonald, and Mayes (2012) remark that 'bogan' in Australia operates in a similar way to how 'chav' operates in Britain to denote the white working class. They note, "The identity of Bogan is not one afforded to Indigenous Australians; in this respect they remain outside of the nation's symbolic hierarchy. The whiteness of the Bogan identity is, however, like that of the Chav, not pure or unsullied, for it is contaminated, dirtied and tainted by poverty" (2012, p. 145). In Paul's interview transcript, he juxtaposes the 'bad' (and highly classed) nationalism of boganism with his own nationalism, which, as an expression of whiteness, is located in "organic farmer's markets" and as he states later, "local fetes where people are making jams." These middle-upper class expressions of whiteness are in his eyes considered acceptable – he does not reject them, and they make him smile. It is clear that for Paul, 'good' versus 'bad' expressions of whiteness through nationalism are effectively classed, and he distances himself from the lower/working class expressions of "real nationalism" in "boganism and jingoism." Paul's interview illustrates that in Australia, white identities are also mediated by class.

Only a small number of participants use the language of race when asked about how they defined whiteness, which was perhaps to be expected given the "prevailing taboo on race-talk" in the post-racial moment (Mitchell 2012, p. 44). Florian referred to race in a roundabout way, stating that he tended to use the

word Caucasian – a racial descriptor – rather than white: "I think I would refer white people as Caucasian - a habit I got from the USA." Belinda was the only one of the participants who explicitly used the term 'race' when talking about her own white identity. When asked what it meant for her to identify as white, she replied:

> It's just your racial background. Both my parents are Caucasian. I would never use that term, white – never. I don't associate as being white. I don't even say it, but Caucasian yeah. Or Aussie I say, but Aussie's not really – it's only when people say, "What nationality are you?" or "What's your background?" I say Aussie. They say "No, no, but country are you from?" Australian. "No but where are your parents from?" Australia and Canada. So it's your race.

Here, Belinda conflates race and nation, while also acknowledging the limitations of such a definition - "but Aussie's not really…" It is not clear from her interview why Belinda opposes the use of the term white, however it is evident that she sees it as synonymous with 'Caucasian'. This indicates that she does not have a problem with racial descriptors themselves, or even with 'race,' but may take issue with talking about race with reference to skin colour.

Belinda was not the only participant to express uneasiness about the term 'white.' A large number of converts interviewed enacted a colour evasive repertoire by stating that they did not use the term white, think of themselves as white, or think about the fact that they were white, despite the fact that the research advertisement requested participants who identified as "white converts to Islam." Riley responded to the question about what she thought made her 'white' by passionately arguing that she did not "see colour" and that a person's background was of no relevance to her:

> You get that a lot, in the Muslim community… Oh where are you from, where are your parents from, and I'm like, who gives a toss really? It makes me a bit, really irritated actually, cos it shouldn't matter, that's the beauty of Islam, it doesn't matter where you're from, it's about your deeds. That's one of the things that I liked about Islam, it's colour blind, like me. It appealed to me.

In Riley's interview, it is clear that she believed that her "colour blindness" placed her in a somewhat enlightened position compared to born Muslims who she believes are "stuck in old ways of thinking." Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has convincingly argued that the claim from white people that they do not see race is a form of 'colour-blind racism,' which emerged in the post-civil rights era as one of the dominant forms of racial ideology in the United States of America (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2013), and is central to the notion of 'the post-racial' (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Colour-blind racism dismisses the significance of race to the social world, often relegating 'race' to an issue of the past that is no longer relevant to contemporary life. If one believes that Australian society is now beyond race just like the United States, then born Muslims who acknowledge racialisation are "stuck in old ways," as Riley states. Adopting a colour blind approach to questions of race and culture allows Riley to individualise Muslims experiences of Islam in Australia – "it doesn't matter where you come from, it's about your deeds"- thus avoiding reflecting on her own complicity in racialising structures that position Muslims as antithetical to whiteness.

Michael also referred to being blind to colour insofar as it related to whiteness, stating that he simply sees himself "as a convert," but demonstrated more self-awareness about where his attitudes towards race may have emerged from. When he was asked whether he saw himself as white, he replied:

> Not really. I just see myself as a convert. I suppose probably because I'm in Australia and I just assume, naturally assume that the majority of us are white. So I'm sort of blind to it. So I just see myself as being a convert. I haven't broken it down as to say, oh yeah they're white or… this is the first time I've actually heard it. It's interesting though to see whether Muslims actually, whether you guys actually break it down into white or dark or Anglo or whatever.

Unlike Riley, Michael's quotation hints at the beginning of self-awareness of the normativity of whiteness, by recognising that his blindness could be due to the dominance of whiteness in Australia. Michael acknowledges that the fact that the majority of people in Australia are perceived as white has an impact on his own race-thinking, and indeed his *race seeing*, suggesting that those in more subordinate positions such as non-white Muslims may employ different perceptual practices in relation to race to himself. However, he also states that "this is the first time I've actually heard it," indicating that his engagement with this research project was the first time that he thought of himself as being perceived as racially different to other Muslims. This can partly be attributed to the fact that whiteness is invisible to most white people, as I elaborated on in Chapter Two – in the words of hooks, "White people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze" (2015, p. 168). Michael's interview suggests that he was not aware that non-white Muslims perceived his whiteness until I (a non-white Muslim) questioned him about it, indicating that hooks' assessment of why whiteness is invisible to white people could also be applicable to other racialised groups.

Interestingly, Michael's interview transcript suggests that none of Michael's experiences as a Muslim prior to our contact had intimated that he was perceived as white by non-white people, which is curious given that it was a recurring theme in most of the other participants' narratives. It is possible that his lack of awareness about his whiteness, unlike other participants, was because he had only been Muslim for a short amount of time and did not interact with many other Muslims, and also because he did not visibly identify as Muslim through religious markers such as a beard or a *kufi.* However, it is

clear that through the process of the interview he began to understand that "Muslims" are racialised differently to white converts, to use the dualistic terminology that he himself employs, and as a result doesn't quite place himself in the category of "Muslims." "Muslims" are "you guys," referring to non-white Muslims such as myself, not "we."

In contrast, Edward stated that he was aware of being white, but admitted that he had never interrogated what that meant, positing: "To be honest I've never really thought of it, you know, being white and whatever else. So that's a tough one, I really don't know how to answer that. Um… Obviously I am white. I've never given it any thought." Edward struggled to articulate what whiteness meant for him as an identity, and eventually framed his own whiteness with reference to how he believed that other people might view him: "I would say that obviously people would perceive me as both physically white and also in terms of a political sense, white. I guess that's how people see me." It was common for participants to struggle with questions about racial identity and white culture in the interviews. This could be explained in part by the fluidity of whiteness, and race in general: Australian whiteness studies scholar Jane Durie has argued that "there is no straightforward, singular relationship between whiteness as a signifier of dominance and authority and the lived experience of white people" (1999, p. 153). Another factor may be that while most participants were ultimately able to offer some description of what they felt their white identity meant to them and what it represented after some reflection, a small number of converts were not able to respond to the question, expressing discomfort at the questioning and stating that they did not know how to answer it. Previous empirical studies of whiteness and white identity have found a similar reticence and discomfort amongst white participants when talking about their whiteness (Adams 2015, Cooks 2003, Frankenberg 1993),

which some have suggested is an important pedagogical step for individuals to begin to confront their complicity in white supremacy (Cooks 2003). In these situations, if after some time the participant still appeared to be struggling, I did not pursue the line of enquiry further.

Unlike participants who did not feel that their white identity was an important or significant part of their person, there were also a small number of people who indicated that they had given a significant amount of thought to what it meant to be white, and were more likely to utilise race cognisant repertoires in their interview. Ben's definition was influenced by his academic study as a historian:

> Being of European descent. Because I understand it as a – I mean, I'm an academic so I understand it as a historical and politically contingent term based on being from Europe which is why until very recently someone who was Russian for example wasn't actually considered white in that sense. But now they are. I identify as white, I don't identify as Anglo because I'm Celtic, I'm Scottish. So there's a difference. So maybe Anglo-Celtic instead of Anglo-Saxon. And a certain wider cultural and intellectual currents that you might digest organically, just growing up in the society that you're raised in. So that would help you identify as white.

Ben located his ability to discuss whiteness as a socially and politically defined identity with the fact that he is a historian and understood the historical lineage of race and whiteness.

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that participants who had given some thought to what whiteness meant were more likely to describe whiteness as a position of power and privilege, regardless of whether they approached the question from an explicitly academic framework. James commented that he had been aware that he was white since he was very young because he had grown up in Blacktown, an area in Sydney's Western suburbs which he described as

"extremely multicultural - I was the minority in my school." James describes whiteness almost purely as a position of power, and something that he feels "almost ashamed of" despite acknowledging that he cannot change it. Early on in his interview, James explained that as a teenager, he had desperately wished he was not white:

> It's normal to want to fit in, but most of the time it's the other way, people want to fit into white Australia. Most of my friends weren't white though… So every day or – maybe every week, one of my friends would have something kinda bad, like racist, happen to them, especially when we started going to the city to go to clubs and that. Or with police, security, altercations… And I felt guilty, and I still feel guilty… Sometimes I wish I could scrub my skin off, but I can't and what good would that do anyway? It doesn't change anything.

James's quotation highlights that his understanding of his whiteness stemmed predominantly from his interactions with his friends and peer groups, and the growing recognition that they received differential treatment from him both from individuals and from institutions like the police force, and as he states later in his interview, schools and places of employment. It is clear that he feels guilty about his whiteness and the benefits it affords him – "sometimes I wish I could scrub my skin off" - which is one of the affective responses of race cognisance identified by Frankenberg (1993). The political efficacy of 'white guilt' has been questioned by scholar of race and education Zeus Leonardo, who contends that:

> …white guilt can be a paralysing sentiment that helps neither whites nor people of colour. White guilt blocks critical reflection because whites end up feeling individually blameworthy. In fact, they become overconcerned with whether or not they 'look racist' and forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism (2004, p. 140).

The paralysis that Leonardo describes is apparent in James' transcript, as he expresses frustration at feeling unable to do anything to dismantle racial structures as an individual.

Like James, Katherine described whiteness in relation to privilege, but extended her analysis beyond that which was offered by James to situate the relationship between whiteness and power on a historical continuum. When asked what she meant when she said that she was white, she replied:

> I guess coming from the dominant society, coming from the powerful section in society, people who are more likely to get power, achieve power, have influence in society. Especially being English, coming from the colonial legacy of having an Empire, ruling the rest of the world, and therefore having these weird Orientalist assumptions about other people. We still call our colonisers our adventurers, and we say they adventured all over the world and that's what we tell our children rather than we stole societies and committed genocides. Not so nice.

James and Katherine both primarily view whiteness as negative, suggesting in their interviews that the privilege that they have as a result of their whiteness is unearned and unwanted. Similarly, although Paul pointed out positive aspects of what he viewed as white culture earlier in his interview when he discussed the "spirit or love of the nation" that he associated with white culture, he also somewhat tentatively acknowledged what he termed "a little more darker, sinister heart which is kind of linked to our colonial past." Like James, Paul indicated that it was his contact with non-white people and cultures that helped him understand the advantage that whiteness affords white people:

> There's certainly that white privilege factor that comes in. I'm sure that kind of hidden racism at the job interview that will be done. The white guy, I dunno, if it's for certain companies the white guy has the advantage… So there's that sinister white heart where, I dunno – I don't even like using the word whiteness but just for want of a better description, it's convenient, that I think of that British colonial arrogance and I think of the Union Jack with its many negative connotations. And I don't associate that at all with non-white cultures. I always see them as the opposite, where they're usually being oppressed by some

arrogant white force. Or colonial history, how that plays out in colonial times is in those things. It's in the job interviews, in the judging that might go on – it's a broad thing, but that darker side is there. And I don't think I was ever aware of that until after I became Muslim. Not because I became Muslim but just because I started travelling and looking at the world and looking at the experiences of South Africa.

In this quotation, Paul simultaneously employs colour evasive ("I don't even like using the word whiteness") and race cognisant ("they're usually being oppressed by some arrogant white force") repertoires to describe white privilege, demonstrating that rather than being two completely distinct discourses as indicated by Frankenberg (1993), they can and do sometimes work in tandem. Perhaps particularly significant to note about this interview is that Paul's characterisation of white privilege is as something that is external to himself. While he does acknowledge that he is white in the interview, Paul is more likely to situate himself in whiteness when it is in reference to aspects of white culture that he finds endearing or humorous. He is less self-reflexive when it comes to talking about whiteness and power: these negative aspects of whiteness are, for Paul, located with bogans (as explored earlier in this section), in "certain companies," "arrogant white forces," "in colonial times," and in apartheid South Africa.

The dissonance in Paul's quotation above can be explained through the work of Leonardo, who has suggested that the focus on white privilege in whiteness studies through the work of people like Peggy McIntosh has effectively masked and even minimised the function of white supremacy in the creation and maintenance of that white privilege (Leonardo 2004). He argues that centring the discussion on white privilege as something that is passively received by white people rather than something that is actively constructed through white racial domination, whiteness studies has not to date sufficiently addressed the root cause of racism, white supremacy. As Leonardo states, "Privilege is the

daily cognate of structural domination. Without securing the latter, the former is not activated" (2004, p. 148). The preoccupation with white privilege allows white people – including white scholars of race – to avoid the conversation on how they themselves may be complicit in the maintenance of white supremacy, beyond simply passively receiving white privilege. Similarly, people like Paul are able to acknowledge their white privilege while simultaneously relegating racism to specific places, people and times.

This section has examined some of the different ways in which participants conceptualised their racial identities, with particular attention to how their racial repertoires might employ colour and power evasive or race cognisant discourses. The diversity and nuance in participants' stories suggest that while Frankenberg's model lays a strong foundation for understanding how white people understand their whiteness, there is scope to further delineate the racial repertoires Frankenberg employs. For example, amongst those who were seemingly race cognisant, participants varied in how they understood their white identities in relation to power and privilege. While some acknowledged that whiteness afforded them some privilege in Australia and globally, participants like Paul simultaneously distanced themselves from their own complicity in racial structures by relegating racial discrimination and prejudice to specific corporations, regimes, and groups of people. Still others suggested that their politics of anti-racism contributed to a lessening of their whiteness, as expressed by Daniel in section 7.3.2 later in this chapter. In the following section, I look at the concept of the "white Muslim" in greater detail, to demonstrate that while for some participants their conversion to Islam strongly challenged their racial knowledges and identities (as I have begun to map out in the current section), for others, their experiences as white Muslim converts simply reinforced their beliefs and attitudes about race.

7.3 Being a White Muslim

Previous chapters have established that Islam is a racialised religion in Australia, through analysis of interview data as well as reference to global literatures (Bayoumi 2008; 2009; 2015, Cainkar 2007, Dunn et al 2007, Jamal 2008, Poynting et al 2004, Selod & Embrick 2013). Converts interviewed for this project responded to their entry into a religion racialised as 'non-white' in a number of different ways. In this section, I examine participant reflections on what it means to be a white Muslim, with particular focus on changes in how participants engaged with or thought about their whiteness after their conversion. Two key trajectories will be analysed and discussed with reference to the interview data. Some participants described becoming acutely aware of their whiteness only after they converted to Islam and their whiteness was either challenged by non-Muslims who viewed their conversion as a departure from whiteness (as documented in Chapter Five), or played a role in how they felt they were treated and received by some members of the Muslim communities that they engaged with (shown in Chapter Six). This theme will be examined in section 7.3.1. For some of these participants, becoming Muslim led to an increasing awareness of their relationship with power as a white person over time, often related to their exposure to non-white peoples. In other words, they became more conscious of their white privilege and the role it played in how others perceived and treated them. Secondly, it was common for participants to state that they felt that they had become less white after converting to Islam, some suggesting that becoming Muslim placed them on the borders of whiteness or even caused them to not be white anymore.

It is important to note that more than half of the participants did not express any change to how they perceived themselves racially. Many of these participants were among those who asserted whiteness to simply be a skin colour, or an ethnic identity that they did not place much significance in; however there were also some who were aware of their whiteness but simply felt that Islam was very much separate to their racial identity, regardless of what other people may say to them or how they may be treated. These themes are examined in sections 7.4 and 7.5 later in the chapter.

7.3.1 Conversion to Islam reinforced their whiteness

For some of the participants that I interviewed, becoming Muslim made them conscious of their whiteness in a way that they had not recognised before, or alternatively made them more aware of the privilege that their whiteness afforded them in mainstream society. In other words, the process of entering a religion racialised as 'non-white' and correspondingly, gaining access to racialised communities, gave them a greater insight into how their whiteness operated *outside* of their previously held normative understandings of their racial identity. The idea that whiteness is lived by white people as a neutral and unraced identity has been well-documented in the literature, and indeed forms one of the most significant and central theories offered by whiteness studies scholars, as outlined in section 2.4.

The experiences recounted by some participants in this project are illustrative of a shift between the first and second stage of the psychosocial theory known as white racial development theory as first formulated by educational psychologist Janet Helm in the early 1990s, whereby white people move from thinking of themselves as being unraced and "normal" to becoming aware that they embody a white racial identity. Helm argues that it is necessary for white

people to become aware of their racial identity, and states that she developed the model because it is important to raise the awareness of white people about their role in creating and maintaining racism (1992). In Helm's model, the first stage is contact, whereby white people may deny that they have a racial identity, and specifically may deny that they benefit from racial privilege. During this stage, white people may not refer to themselves as white, or refer to whiteness as being simply a skin colour, or may otherwise be uncomfortable with the use of the term or concept of whiteness. As illustrated in the previous section, this colour blind approach to whiteness was evident in some of the interviews with participants.

The next stage of Helm's white racial identity development model, disintegration, can emerge after sustained contact with racialised groups. In this phase, white people become exposed to interpersonal and institutional racism experienced by non-white people and correspondingly become more conscious of their own whiteness, and may experience dissonance and conflict as they come to terms with the idea that they benefit from racial oppression. Some of the converts interviewed in this project appeared to have entered or even passed this phase of Helm's white racial identity development theory. Their shift from stage one to stage two often occurred gradually, over a period of years rather than instantaneously, which participants tended to attribute to increased exposure to non-white Muslim communities over time. Stephanie described it as a feeling of "difference… you just start to realise that, when you're with Muslims, that *you're* the odd one out. And until that moment, you have an epiphany then, because until that moment you had always been the same as everyone else." Stephanie indicated that her awareness of it grew as she came into contact with more and more Muslims:

Everyone would just be so *nice* to you all the time. Like weirdly nice. I'm not complaining, because it was – there's some comfort in that… But then it started to get weird, because everyone treated you like you were so special and I started to realise that hang on, it's just cos I'm white… After a while it started to become uncomfortable for me. I think it was then that it started to occur to me that hang on, white Muslims get special treatment. Maybe white people in general get special treatment… I felt really dumb, like how did I not notice that before?

Stephanie's story emerges out of positive reactions to her whiteness, referring to the glorification of white converts that I discussed in section 6.3.3. During her interview, Stephanie was at first hesitant to talk about how the glorification of white converts made her feel about her whiteness, because she did not want to be ungrateful to the communities that "offered [her] a safe haven… they were so kind."

While Stephanie's growing consciousness of the privilege that her whiteness afforded her emerged from her interactions within Muslim communities who venerated her whiteness, other participants indicated that their understanding of whiteness as a position of advantage in Australia became heightened after they became Muslim and had greater opportunity to observe how non-white Muslims and Muslims who visibly identified as Muslim were treated by the broader public. Cassie pointed to the example of her Pakistani-born husband, stating that over time she noticed how non-Muslims responded to him differently than they did to her:

…but sometimes I feel in situations where I'm with him, in situations where he's interacting with people that may not know him very well or might be unsure of him, I feel like my presence can help to legitimise him. Does that make sense? Cos they look at me and I'm like female and white and have a reasonably simple name. But I'm not threatening, they think they can easily understand me, in a superficial interaction.

Here, Cassie notes that the perception of threat that attaches to her husband is as a result of a mixture of his racialised facial features and his non-English

name. His 'difference' is viewed as dangerous; Cassie's 'sameness' – her visually perceptible 'whiteness' and familiar English name – mitigates the threat and contains it. Cassie noted that it was through her interactions with her husband and other Muslims that she started to understand the differential treatment that non-white Muslims received from non-Muslims. She reflected:

> Whereas maybe I just wasn't aware of how easy it was for me until I kind of saw that it could be difficult or that people could kind of respond to you with uncertainty or distrust or those kinds of things? Maybe that has changed my perspective of my own experiences as a person who's white? Growing up it was just kind of a non-issue. It was pretty… it was a white environment. So I was just like, yeah it just didn't come up in my conscious mind anywhere, it just didn't come up.

Prior to that, Cassie stated, growing up in an almost entirely white community on the North Coast of NSW meant that she was not aware that her whiteness afforded her a certain advantage, precisely because everyone looked and acted in similar ways to her. As she started to notice that people treated her husband differently to her in certain situations, she became aware that the interactions were highly racialised.

Like Cassie, Daniel felt that after his conversion to Islam he became more aware of the advantages that he had accrued in society due to his whiteness. However, Daniel differentiated his experiences from that of white Anglo converts like Cassie by emphasising that as a Bulgarian migrant, he is racialised differently to Western Europeans. Despite his insistence of this fact, he acknowledged that it was not until he became Muslim that he became more aware of what it was like to experience racialisation. After describing an incident he witnessed where his South Indian friend was abused on a train, he explained:

> Later on a couple of months later I asked him about it, and he didn't even remember it. Which kind of alerted me that for him this is probably more usual than for me. Because I remembered it because it was a shock to the system. But

> yeah, I think becoming Muslim definitely... If you have this understanding, kind of pushes you down a path which the only way to avoid it is to put your head in the sand. Cos you kind of recognise certain things.

In his interview, Daniel suggested that becoming Muslim made it harder for white people to ignore or dismiss racism against non-white people, partly because of the immersion into predominantly non-white Muslim communities that often followed conversion. Daniel posited that greater interaction with people of colour meant that converts could potentially became more exposed to racism and correspondingly, their own privilege in not experiencing racism. Importantly, he notes that some white converts purposefully ignore racism, thereby ignoring the ways in which they themselves may benefit from white privilege and racism; examples of the phenomenon Daniel described will be explored later in this chapter.

It is clear from Daniel's interview that he situates himself in the first group of white Muslims – the ones who, through their interactions with non-white Muslims, become race cognisant. Katherine was another participant who stated that her conversion to Islam made her more critical of her own positioning as a white person in the Muslim community, but remarked that it had less to do with the act of conversion or the religious practices of being a Muslim, and more to do with the people and ideas that she started engaging with after she became Muslim. Like Ahmed, whose story is shared later in this section, she located her growing criticality at a point well after her conversion. When asked whether her perceptions of whiteness had changed after she became Muslim, Katherine replied:

> I would like to think that I've become a lot more critical of whiteness and of myself as a white person and my assumptions and beliefs of other people. And where I might have before made assumptions about people that were either patronising or lazy assumptions, I think I've become a lot more aware of that kind of thing, and I'm able to challenge them a lot more now.

However, Katherine added that the change came slowly, and that it was "well after [she] became Muslim" that she began to develop a critical approach to her whiteness:

> It was – you know, reading a specific set of people, knowing particular people who studied that or focused on that in the Muslim community who really challenged how I think. When I became Muslim, I was still – so like, more than rejecting frameworks I had always believed in, I became Muslim and a deep part of becoming Muslim was that I felt like Islam fitted these frameworks. Such as human rights and feminism, how I understood them. In a specific way of understanding them. The universalism of human rights and Western feminism as the best feminism. And well after I became Muslim, like a couple of years later was I challenged on them… I feel like a lot of that is to do with whiteness and accepting the white narrative on these things.

Through Katherine's telling of her story, her conversion itself had minimal impact on her changing conceptualisation of whiteness and her own racial identity, except that it exposed her to new groups of people, some of whom challenged her existing worldview. There is little in her interview transcript to indicate that a similar outcome would not have been reached had she not converted to Islam, acting as a reminder that participants' conversions are simply one aspect of their lives, and their Muslim identity just one social identity amongst many that they hold.

A number of participants who recognised that their whiteness positioned them differentially to other Muslims remarked that their whiteness was used to ostracise them from sections of the community. Kim's negative experiences in the mosque, for example, discussed in section 6.2.2, highlighted for her that some Muslims felt that her whiteness made her "filthy" and *"najas"*, and thus disallowed from entering religious spaces. Similarly, Henry suggests that his negative experiences of feeling patronised and viewed as inferior within the Muslim community were a constant reminder that he was white, and thus was considered to be less morally upright and religiously observant than other

Muslims. Unlike Stephanie from earlier in the section, who appreciated that her growing cognisance of her whiteness caused her to be more aware of racial inequalities and the relationality of power with regards to race, Henry took a colour evasive approach and argued that it went against the "spirit of Islam," positing that "race shouldn't, well - I mean it doesn't matter in Islam, so why does it matter to Muslims?"

While most participants described having their whiteness reinforced by their interactions with Muslims, Ahmed indicated that it was through engagements with non-Muslims, particularly Islamophobic people on the internet, that begun to highlight to him the significance of his racial identity. He stated:

> You know, like your Islamophobes really love latching onto that, not realising it's something that I don't actually care about. In terms of like, "you're a race traitor" or "you're not really white anymore". And I'm like, I don't care, you know, good…. But yes, it's been challenged a few times, in ways that I see as being positive because it's making visible the problem of whiteness rather than stripping away from me this privilege that I want to hang onto. So where I have been challenged it's been more along those lines and I've thought was a good thing.

Unlike participants who related that interactions in which they were told they were no longer white made them feel less white, a topic that is explored in section 7.3.3, Ahmed stated that his experiences as a white Muslim reinforced and extended his understanding of whiteness precisely *because* his whiteness was challenged by some non-Muslims. The reasoning provided by Ahmed was that when people called into question his whiteness because of his decision to become Muslim, it reinforced for him that if it were not for his religion, he would unconditionally be regarded as white by other white people, thereby reminding him of the privileges and advantages he accrues due to his whiteness. By characterising it in this way, Ahmed clearly identifies that he

views whiteness as a hegemonic racial identity in a hierarchy of racial identities, and not simply a cultural affiliation.

In his interview, Ahmed explained that he had seen his whiteness as one identity amongst many, rather than as a privileged identity, for most of his life as a Muslim, but that his perception and analysis of whiteness had shifted significantly in the last four years:

> Whiteness is now something that I associate a lot more directly with a power system. It's something that I don't actually want to have in myself, but at the same time I can't pretend it's not there. Whereas before I just saw it as a difference in a range of others. I don't see it that way anymore. I tie it directly to a global power system, a power system that I reject. So I call myself white now more than before because it's something that I can't remove, even though I reject whiteness itself. Whereas back then I wasn't aware of those issues in the same way.

Ahmed's strategy of reasserting his whiteness and reminding himself and others of his whiteness in an attempt to highlight his racial privilege is in direct contradiction to the suggestions made by scholars such as Miles and Banton that racial terminology and references to race need to be abolished in order to also abolish racism. For Ahmed, his anti-racist identity requires him to acknowledge the benefits he accrues due to his racial identity, rather than avoiding the issue of race altogether.

Ahmed's changing ideas about his whiteness coincided to some extent with his move to Indonesia and marriage to an Indonesian wife, however when this was suggested to him as a potential reason for his shift in thinking, he rejected this explanation:

> No, it's come through actually because of my continued ties with the Muslim community in Australia. And also because of my conscious expansion of links of solidarity with people of colour in different countries, like the United States and Canada. And of course in Australia. And so I've become aware of the ideas

connected to it. Through the Muslim community, but also through a broader community of solidarity and struggle, globally.

In this quotation, Ahmed attributes his growing awareness of the discourse and positionality of whiteness in the Muslim community as a part of a "broader community of solidarity and struggle." Like Katherine, Ahmed doesn't link his changing views about whiteness directly to his conversion, but acknowledges a tangential connection. He does, however, state that inhabiting both a white and a Muslim identity does make him relate differently to his whiteness than he would have if he had not converted. He attributes this feeling to being a Muslim who is part of a global anti-racist struggle and simultaneously in a position of power in relation to other non-white people. Although he doesn't identify it as a factor, his development of a white anti-racist identity may also have been amplified by living in Indonesia.

This section has highlighted conversion to Islam can reveal or reinforce one's whiteness, which may signal a shift in the racial repertoires a person utilised when thinking about their whiteness. For some participants, their change in approach to their whiteness came very soon after conversion, as they began to associate with non-white Muslims. This was usually the case for participants who had been raised in areas with very little cultural diversity, and for whom becoming Muslim also meant entry into a new and culturally heterogeneous community – and greater knowledge of the racism that members of that community faced. For other participants, the fact that they were racialised as white became apparent to them some time after conversion, after receiving "special treatment" from non-white Muslims, or feeling that their whiteness was glorified by born Muslims. Still others located the source of their knowledge of racialisation with non-Muslims who called them race traitors. In the following section, I will explore the opposite phenomenon – where

conversion to Islam led to participants feeling less white than before, or like they had left – or been evicted from – whiteness.

7.3.2 Less white than before

The previous subsection explored how participants' whiteness was revealed or reinforced after their conversion. In this section, I start to examine the ways in which conversion significantly challenged or disrupted participants' white identities. Numerous reasons offered by white converts, mostly relating to their interactions with other people, have already been documented in Chapters Five and Six. In those previous chapters, I chronicled the diverse ways in which both Muslims and non-Muslims propagate the notion that Islam is a racialised religion that is culturally foreign to whiteness. This section adds to the discussion by describing the impact of racialisation on white converts who discussed feeling that their whiteness decreased or was otherwise mitigated by their conversion to Islam.

Some participants attributed their feelings of no longer being as white as they once were primarily to negative reactions to their conversion from white non-Muslims. Participants who described experiencing racialised abuse or harassment from non-Muslims, usually from strangers or colleagues, were more likely to express feeling like they had in fact been relocated to the borders of whiteness, whereas previously they had been secure in the centre of whiteness. In reference to the Islamophobic and often racialised abuse he receives when he wears traditionalist Muslim garb such as the thawb or kufi, Xander stated:

> It's like they can't see past your clothes, so all they see is a dark-skinned bearded Arab man even when the guy in front of them is as white as snow and blonde to boot. They don't want to believe you're white. And after a while, you stop believing it yourself. Because it's that persistent, you just start thinking

that hang on, maybe I'm not white. What does white even mean? You really start to question everything, yeah.

Riley posits a similar theory, stating that the occasional times she wears a headscarf these days, such as on Eid or on the way to religious classes, she feels like she does not fit in with the broader Australian population:

> But it's not even that they'll say something to you, it's more a feeling that you get. Maybe it's all in my head. But I do think that people look at you like you're *different*, and then you *feel* different, and then you start getting – or I do anyway, I start getting worried about being seen as different and so I'll do something that's like, super Aussie like my accent gets more bogan or I'll start, I dunno, talking about rugby or something. I can't help it… in those moments I definitely feel like people don't see me as white, and I start to question it too so I start doing things to prove it.

In these quotations, both Riley and Xander refer to 'questioning' their own whiteness in response to treatment or perceived treatment from other white people. While Xander describes accepting his new non-white status to some extent, Riley attempts to regain her whiteness by performing 'Aussieness,' which in her quotation she states manifests in a 'bogan' accent and sports talk. It is clear through her quotation that Riley associates these cultural aspects of Australianness with whiteness, and she feels that the *ḥijāb* locates her as being outside both of these identities, leading to anxiety about her racial positioning in such contexts.

For other participants, the feeling that they had 'left,' or in some cases been 'evicted' from, whiteness stemmed not from responses to their clothing but from their lack of participation in certain cultural norms and customs. One participant, Paul, mentioned that not participating in Christmas made them feel like "an outsider… like I'm not really white anymore." Fatima did not point to any specific cultural norms or customs, but indicated that she felt that she was no longer as white as she once was, because of the way that non-Muslims perceived her:

I think a lot of people do question that. A lot of Australians – when they've asked me my ethnic background and I've told them truthfully, I have found that they've sort of questioned… or not so much questioned but they have acted like I'm not white anymore. And particularly being Australian, there are a lot of cultural elements that they know that I won't do anymore… I know that practising Islam will make me live different to a lot of other Australians. And so I think particularly a lot of Australians, in the past they've reacted to me in a way that's just, "she's not white anymore".

While Riley, Xander, Fatima and Paul referred to feeling like they were no longer white because of their interactions with white non-Muslims, for Daniel it was his non-white friends who would "pull [him] into the brown category." Referring to a South Indian friend of his, he states:

Because he was a lefty [politically left wing] he would have a lot of anti-American politics. And a lot of times due to generalisations cross over to white people. And several times when he would have one of these rants going on he would turn over to me and say, "Daniel – you're not white." And I knew what he meant. He wasn't denying my genetic heritage.

Omar too indicated that it was through socialising with his new Muslim peer-groups that his whiteness started to become challenged and disrupted:

People like labels, it makes them feel safe. So if you have the label of Muslim, well that's synonymous with being any background that's not white. And they'll kind of… give you a pass. It comes up a lot more with things like humour or pop culture references, where they might be making jokes about their own cultural group and you don't know whether to laugh or not, cos it might be racist… Sometimes it's mild, like a joke about Arab time or brown people time, and it's okay for you to make a joke about it too cos you're given an honorary brown person status, almost. But there have also been times when they're more, well they're less mild. I don't feel comfortable making jokes at those times as a white person.

When asked to give some examples of those times, Omar replied:

…there was a conversation about so-called "moderate Muslims," who are seen as sell outs. There are quite a few white converts in the [Facebook] group, and one of them was calling these other moderate Muslims, 'Uncle Toms'. And none of the others in the group pulled him up on this. I remember reading it and thinking, that's not cool. You're white. You shouldn't be using that kind of

language. But it seemed acceptable, people accepted it because he was Muslim and so I guess there's a certain level of oppression that attaches there, and people might feel like they relate somehow to black people.

Omar's discomfort with a white person's use of the term 'Uncle Tom' to refer to a Muslim who is perceived to be carrying out the aims of the government is due to the origins of the term, which is sometimes used by Black people to refer to other Black people who are viewed as "sell outs." Omar expressed uneasiness about a white person appropriating the term to refer to Muslims because he felt that for a privileged white person to use the word to put down a person of colour denied the political realities of their respective subject positions. For Omar the issue is clear cut, as he feels that the level of disadvantage that he might experience as a white person is not comparable to that of a Black person in America, or a non-white Muslim in Australia, particularly as a Muslim who does not visibly identify as Muslim on a day to day basis. In Daniel's experience, he found that while "some Muslims will be pulling me more into the brown people category, which I don't mind," "there is a risk that one person will definitely not feel that way." Because of this perceived risk, Daniel stated that he tends to prefer the safer option of not using certain language or making particular jokes, even if a non-white Muslim friend gives him permission to do so. Daniel noted, however, that his self-perception of where he fits on the white/non-white scale has changed considerably over the last three years:

> I guess before I was in the middle, I didn't know where I fit. At this stage I guess I can see kind of, I guess it's a journey and I'm somewhat on one side of it. It's hard to explain. Not white... Whatever the other side is called. It probably has a lot to do with the type of politics that over the last few years I've seen change, been attracted to, then identity per se. Because I still identify as a white Muslim whatever that means. But at the same time, there seems to be two types of white Muslims. The type that are generally – they know what they're talking about in terms of minority politics, privilege, and all this type of stuff. And on the other hand, the ones who – if I was being harsh to them – I would say, they either don't know about their own privilege or they want to keep it as much as possible.

In this quotation, Daniel adds another dimension to whiteness, beyond that of culture, identity and power. While he acknowledges that he is still a white Muslim and still calls himself a white Muslim, he simultaneously states that he feels that he is on the other side of whiteness because of his cognisance of whiteness and race politics. He positions himself in contrast to white converts who put "their heads in the sand," and refuse to recognise their positionality as people with privilege in comparison to non-white Muslims. In this way, Daniel implies that a convert's whiteness can be somewhat mitigated if they have a strong understanding of race politics and commitment to racial justice. This raises the possibility for further delineating Frankenberg's power/colour evasive repertoire to distinguish between those whose evasiveness is intentional and calculated and those whose evasiveness primarily stems from a lack of thought about the topic.

The above quotation provided by Daniel contradicts itself as within a short space of time he states that he is on the other side of white, but that he identifies as a white Muslim. One interpretation of his words could perhaps suggest that he is taking a similar position to that of Ignatiev and Harvey. Writing in the 1990s, Ignatiev and Harvey developed the concept of the 'race traitor' as a term for white people who understood their complicity in racist structures and wished to abandon or deidentify with whiteness. Their motto, "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (1996, p. 10), entreats white people to "struggle to abolish the white race from within" (1996, p. 2). Ignatiev and Harvey describe whiteness as a club, and explain that their journal is an attempt to "reach out to those who are dissatisfied with the terms of membership in the white club" (1996, p. 13)… "Race Traitor aims to dissolve the club, to break it apart, to explode it" (1996, p. 11). The idea of the 'race traitor' proposed by Ignatiev and Garvey, just like Thomas's self-characterisation of his racial

identity, appears to promote a reassertion of white racial identity while concurrently rejecting membership to that very club.

The danger in Ignatiev and Garvey's work is that fervent proclamations of race treason by white people can lead to the belief that they have managed to disown their whiteness, and repudiate the benefits they accrue as a person who is racialised as white. This weakness is highlighted by Alcoff in her article 'What Should White People Do?' when she states, "One's appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for these privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them" (1998, p. 17). Daniel's political beliefs, no matter how strongly anti-racist or radical they are, are not apparent on his body like his skin colour, and do not absolve him of his privilege. Thus, holding the belief that one's political inclinations mitigate one's whiteness can potentially lead to less-than-ideal outcomes, as encapsulated by Alcoff:

> …some "treasonous" whites, with white privilege still largely in place, might then feel entitled to disengage with whiteness without feeling any link of responsibility for white racist atrocities of the past; or they might consider a declaration that they are "not white" as a sufficient solution to racism without the trouble of organizing or collective action. This position would then end up uncomfortably similar to the "colorblindness" attitude that pretends ignorance about one's own white identity and refuses responsibility (1998, p. 17).

To a certain extent, Daniel's interview gives credence to Alcoff's concerns, as he rapidly alternates between describing himself as white while also repudiating his whiteness because of his political beliefs. While Daniel does not use the term 'race traitor,' it is clear that he believes that his anti-racist beliefs distinguishes him from white converts with "their heads in the sand," and contributes to him no longer being as white as he was before. However, the interview did not reveal whether Daniel considered his declaration "a sufficient solution to

racism," and so further conclusions cannot be drawn from the data as to whether or not his disengagement was politically inexpedient.

The other aspect of Daniel's interview that is useful to discuss is his description of other white converts who intentionally blind themselves to their privilege. Daniel comes back to this point a few minutes later in the interview, when discussing his first memory of recognising his own white privilege, stating, "But yeah, at the same time I know some Muslims who convert, particularly from Anglo-Saxon background who have been able to avoid it. I don't want to make judgement calls about if they're putting their heads in the sand, but there's that as well." The phenomenon Daniel describes has been referred to as "white ignorance" by Caribbean philosopher Charles Mills (2007), who argues that epistemic ignorance such as the type engendered by white ignorance can be characterised as "group-based cognitive handicaps" (2007, p. 15). Mills suggests that white ignorance "is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race - white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications - plays a crucial causal role" (2007, p. 20). Important to this definition, and as Alcoff points out, the concept of ignorance in this context is not simply the absence of knowledge, but a wilful and structurally rooted denial of knowledge, which again raises the question of whether Frankenberg's racial repertoires could be extended to consider the intentionality of ignorance within her repertoires. Of ignorance, Alcoff states:

> Even in mainstream epistemology, the topic of ignorance as a species of bad epistemic practice is not new, but what is new is the idea of explaining ignorance not as a feature of neglectful epistemic practice but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself. The idea of an epistemology of ignorance attempts to explain and account for the fact that such substantive practices of ignorance - wilful ignorance, for example, and socially acceptable but faulty justificatory practices - are structural. This is to say that there are identities and social locations and modes of belief formation, all produced by structural social conditions of a variety of

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sorts, that are in some cases epistemically disadvantaged or defective (2007, p. 39-40).

If we are to apply Alcoff's description of epistemic ignorance to the converts that Daniel refers to, their "put[ting their] head in the sand" is not simply indicative of a deficiency in their epistemic practice, but is indeed a substantive part of their (structurally defined and maintained) white epistemic practice; a key component of which is to choose to wilfully ignore racism around them. However, rather than being a fixed state, Alcoff suggests that it is possible for epistemologies of ignorance to be challenged (2007). She and other philosophers such as Jose Medina (2012) suggest that at least minimal self-knowledge and social knowledge are integral to responsible epistemic practice (Medina 2012, p. 55). The idea that both self-knowledge and social knowledge are required to break out of epistemic ignorance is captured in his quotation when Daniel states, "I would say, they either don't know about their own privilege or they want to keep it as much as possible." Only one of the participants, Liam, suggested that their conversion to Islam led to a complete disassociation with racial privilege. Liam indicated that he felt that he was no longer white because he no longer associated himself with privilege or oppression. When asked about how he conceptualised whiteness, Liam replied first by stating that he was "colour blind," but then going on to say that he felt it was about cultural capital:

> Well see for me, I'm completely colour blind. I think colour is just BS you know. I know that's probably because I'm a product of my environment and in terms of how things did turn out in terms of shaping my own identity…. So again, it's about cultural capital, it's about participation and belonging.

Liam goes on to argue that he does not see himself as white because of his lack of cultural capital due to being from a low socioeconomic background:

> I think that there's all these assumptions about whiteness and it plays out in some of my relationships in terms of how other people perceive it. I have a lot of friends from various low socioeconomic backgrounds who assume that

because I'm white I have it better. And I often find myself in this discourse where they look at me and go, "Well what's your problem, you're a white guy." And I go well I'm a white guy but I have nothing. In fact, you've got more than me. Your family back in your country wherever it is in Asia have probably huge tracts of land that they can sell tomorrow if they wanted to. Or that they can produce something from. My mother lives in a housing commission, in a government housing unit, and when she's gone – that's it. I don't have any assets... I don't have any of that. I don't have any of that to rely on. And that sort of brings a strain sometimes in my relationships in terms of ethnics discourse and ethnically based assumptions about socio economic power.

Liam's references to his class background mirror the discourse of the 'white worrier,' as described by Hage in his 2003 book 'Against Paranoid Nationalism.' Hage employs the concept of 'white paranoia' in his formulation of the term 'white worrier' to describe white Australians, typically working class men, who are beset by the insecurity that they have been left out of Australia's vision for the future. Hage argues that this white paranoia was particularly apparent in working class communities that felt they had been negatively impacted either economically or ideologically under the policies of the former Keating government. Embedded in this discourse is the fantasy of a white-supremacist nation, which exists in the minds of racists and multiculturalists alike, because as Hage contends in an earlier book, "both White racists and White multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the national as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-white 'ethnics' are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to White national will" (1998, p. 18). In the case of racists, this occurs through exclusion and marginalisation, while for multiculturalists it is through their belief that they and other white people have the power to decide to welcome or tolerate ethnic others and regulate the space of the nation through their benevolence (Hage 1998). Although Hage's analysis is now dated, given that he was referring to specific national discourses arising from the Howard

era, it can be argued that Liam's insistence that his racial privilege is expunged by his economic disadvantage emanates from a similar fear.

Liam's interview is elucidating because he is the only participant to directly 'reject' his whiteness, while at the same time agreeing to be part of a study on white converts to Islam. While other participants may have stated that they did not like to use the term white or they saw it only as a skin colour, Liam demonstrated an understanding and acknowledgement of the arguments relating to white privilege, but actively rejected the idea that he himself benefited from white privilege. Indeed, Liam stated that at one point in time he believed those arguments, but that he had since "gotten beyond it" after disassociating himself from his whiteness:

> I've gotten beyond it a lot now. Because I've largely managed to disassociate myself and disconnect myself from being known as white. And most of my friends that I have now don't see me as white. But in the past when I did still see myself as white, I associated that with being a member of an oppressive class who came and took land that didn't belong to them, and *inaudible* luxury throughout the colonial era even though I never got a taste of it. Who now in the postcolonial era are somehow paying the penance for my ancestors. And so there's this kind of shame attached to my identity cos I see that there's still so many ignorant white folk. And I'm ashamed to associate with so many ignorant white folk. So again I sort of managed to disassociate myself.

Liam acknowledges the "shame attached to [his] identity," but contends that it is something of a bygone colonial era and that it has nothing to do with him and his life today. His desire to distance himself from his whiteness is common amongst white people who feel shame due to their whiteness – as Alcoff has noted, shame is "a painful emotion. One wants to avoid it or avoid thinking about it seems to debilitate thoughtful agency and productive action, forcing an inward focus rather than on what needs to be done" (2015, p. 137). Shame thus operates in a similar way to guilt, which I discussed with reference to the work of Leonardo earlier in this chapter. Alcoff goes on to quote the work of Sandra

Bartky who contests the idea that shame and guilt are always demobilising, and suggests that guilt and shame can be politically productive if focused on the right targets. It is clear from his interview however that Liam's shame is not politically productive, or at least had not been to date, as he instead expresses irritation at the idea that white people in the postcolonial era should be held accountable for something that happened long ago, employing a strategy that Jacqueline Nelson terms the "temporal deflection" of racism. In her work on anti-racism local action in New South Wales and South Australia, Nelson found that temporal deflection was often a common technique to distance oneself from racism, defining it as "a strategy of denial or minimisation where a passage of time separates a person or place from racism" (2013, p. 99). Fozdar (2008) uncovered similar sentiments to those expressed by Liam amongst Pākehā in New Zealand in reference to Māori people. She states that almost all of her interview participants, regardless of political background, stated that "since the wrongs done to Māori were generations old – itself an arguable contention - the degree to which these wrongs should be addressed by the current generation is debatable" (2008, p. 541). Fozdar suggests that "Such a framing utilises a discontinuous formulation of history to the present current injustices as contained in the past and enacted by people for whom the current generation cannot be held responsible" (2008, p. 541). In a similar fashion, Liam attempts to deflect his own racism and white privilege by positing that he himself is not racist or privileged, and should not be held accountable for the actions of his ancestors.

Liam's interview is at times illuminating, and simultaneously obfuscating. It is clear that Liam has given a great deal of thought to the concept of whiteness, moving from guilt and shame about his white ancestry and heritage to attempting to disassociate himself from "so many ignorant white folk" – even

adopting an Asian identity: "I joke all the time and say 'Look I'm Asian okay, it's Australasia.' Get over it, we're not in Europe. I'm Asian. I eat Asian cuisine, I speak Asian languages, I spend time with Asian people from various other Asian countries including my own, Australasia." Thus, in Liam's interview, he not only distances himself from the political, social and economic advantages of whiteness by referring to his low socioeconomic status both growing up and even now, but he also distances himself from the cultural aspects of whiteness, referring to food and language.

The experiences of white converts documented in this section reveal that while not all white converts articulate a change in their racial identity post-conversion, for some converts becoming Muslim meant not just a shift in their religious identity, but also in their formulation of their racial identity. This section has highlighted that converts' characterisation of these changes is strongly influenced by their interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims, documented in Chapters Five and Six, and how their whiteness is perceived by the people around them. For some participants, it led to a stronger realisation and recognition of their whiteness, which for some led to racial awareness and for others, an evasion of the knowledge. Other participants stated that converting to Islam made them feel less white, because both Muslims and non-Muslims would treat them as though they were no longer white. The findings of this section have also presented an opportunity to augment and extend Frankenberg's matrix of racial repertoires by utilising the work of Medina, Alcoff and Mills to consider the pivotal role of white ignorance in white people's racial repertoires.

7.4 Inclusion, Exclusion and Being In Between

Up until now, this chapter has focused on explicitly racialised constructions of identity and culture offered by participants. However, it is also important to discuss the racialised frames of seeing and knowing that emerged through discussions of culture and belonging, even where whiteness or race were not directly mentioned. Almost half the participants referred to feeling like they were in an 'in-between' space, where they felt they were not quite white and not quite non-white, or that they no longer "fitted in" with white Australians. These feelings point to a troubling of whiteness instigated by their conversion to Islam. Participants who described feeling like their racial surety had come into question were often aware of their whiteness prior to their conversion, or had become aware of it after their conversion because of the different responses they received from both non-Muslims and non-Muslims, as illustrated in chapters 5 and 6. Thus, in this section I will examine participants' expressions of belonging in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the factors that impacted on their feelings of exclusion and inclusion and the strategies that they employed in order to be more accepted. Where relevant, I will also demonstrate how 'belonging' impacted on some participants' sense of racial identity as well.

Analysis of the interview data revealed that the concept of belonging or not belonging to a community featured frequently in almost all of the participants' stories, and that participants adopted different strategies to gain or regain acceptance amongst Muslims and white non-Muslims. Central to many of the stories of belonging was the suggestion that truly belonging anywhere was out of reach for white converts to Islam. Indeed, for most participants who related a change in their racial identity post-conversion, their conversion to Islam did not solely reinforce their whiteness or solely make them feel that they were no longer white; the vast majority of these participants instead described feeling

like they were in an in-between space, on the borders of both white and Muslim identities, and simultaneously on the borders of two communities – unsettling the dualistic division between 'whiteness' and 'Islam.' For example, Michelle describes feeling 'very white' around Muslims, whereas "when I'm with Australians I don't see myself as white. At all." She suggests that as a white convert you "stop belonging to either side… you don't truly belong to either," referring to an "other space that you dwell in, in the middle." Michelle adds that she feels that she does not fit neatly into any part of society, because as a white Muslim, "I have issues with the white people that hate Muslims and I have issues within the Muslim community because I don't look the same as everybody else." Michelle's sense of not belonging anywhere represents the feelings of many of the white converts interviewed, suggesting that feeling racially 'in-between' is the norm rather than the exception to their experiences.

Like Michelle, Stephanie remarked that she often felt that she vacillated between two communities, but that she was never truly part of any one, at least not in the way that she had been prior to conversion:

> Sometimes I feel like I'm in, you know, *orbit?* Around two planets. And sometimes one pulls me in and sometimes the other, but I can't be part of two orbits at once without tearing myself in half. Sometimes the Muslim community can be so challenging… And I never really know where I can stick my head in or whether someone's going to just say, keep your nose out of it, whitey. But then I don't feel like I am truly accepted by my non-Muslim friends anymore either. It's… something's shifted. And I know something has shifted with me majorly, but it's like for them it's all they see anymore. They no longer see *me.*

For Stephanie, the experience of being "in between" is endured as a negative one that leaves her feeling socially excluded from all facets of society. Rather than viewing her conversion to Islam as an extension of belonging, giving her access to both Muslim and broader Australian communities, she characterises her conversion as a loss of both communities – the community she once had,

and the Muslim community she never had a chance to get to know. Fatima, on the other hand, suggested that there are positive implications for having an "in between" identity. Speaking of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, she posits that white converts can disrupt and challenge non-Muslim constructions of what Muslims represent in ways that non-white Muslims cannot:

> Because when such people who have those sorts of ideas, they can be exposed to as many raised Muslims, they can be as exposed to as many non-Muslims, white non-Muslims as they can, but it actually takes someone who is sort of in between like a convert to confront that, to really confront that idea.

Fatima's interview reveals that despite difficulties in finding a space where she felt she "belonged," she believed that she and other white converts could help to disrupt the racialisation of Muslims and Islam in Australia by their very existence. Fatima thus suggests that there are political benefits to the presence of white converts, as they challenge reified racial constructs of what it means to be white and what it means to be Muslim. Fatima's experience speaks to Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, which suggests that the creation of new subject identities that emerge from the repudiation of essentialised cultural identities (in this case, through the process of conversion to Islam) disrupts dualistic and hegemonic structures constructed by the coloniser. Bhabha refers to the new liminal space that develops through hybridity as "the third space," an identification which is "the cutting edge for negotiation and translation" (Bhabha 1994, p. 38) between cultures. If we presume that white converts occupy the liminal space in between essentialised cultures that Bhabha refers to, disrupting reified and racialised ideas of both whiteness and Islam, then this space can potentially be a positive and productive one for challenging the constructed binaries of Islam and whiteness. Bhabha's suggestion that the third space is a productive space is concisely summarised by Meredith, who states:

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Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility. It is an 'interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative' (Bhabha 1994) space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorisations of culture and identity (Meredith 1998, p. 3).

In this conceptualisation of the liminal space that white converts operate within, the "space between" acts as a space within which culture can be challenged, negotiated and troubled, as Fatima astutely points out, rather than remaining mired in static structures.

As stated earlier, one of the recurring themes within the interview data was a pervasive sense of being excluded or on the outer of different communities. In her interview, Michelle remarks that she wanted to appear to be anything but white so as to fit in amongst other Muslims and not have her religious commitment questioned. When asked whether she thought she would be treated differently by other Muslims if she was not white, Michelle replied:

In a way, within this particular context in Sydney, where there's kind of like an Arab majority community, sometimes I really wish I wasn't white. I wish I looked like something else. I wish I could just appear to be something else… I know it's not possible. Just because of my appearance, I can't hide it, even if I wear a scarf. I have issues both ways. I have issues with the white people that hate Muslims and I have issues within the Muslim community because I don't look the same as everybody else.

Michelle admits that she does not know whether acceptance into the community is any easier for non-white Muslim converts, but suggests that their integration into Muslim communities may be easier for them purely because unlike her, their appearance would not automatically reveal them to be converts. Michelle adds that she thinks the desire to fit in is common amongst other white converts as well, and that some converts lie about the fact that they are converts as a result. Referring to one Muslim woman she knew, Michelle stated that she was 99% sure she lied about her convert status by claiming that

one of her parents was Muslim. Michelle suggested that the reason she lied not just to fit in, but to gain more credibility, particularly as she worked at an organisation that supported new converts:

> And then she started to cover more, wearing the full *burqa* around Lakemba… she lived with other converts and she always used that to gain leverage within the other girls, to kind of be like, "No, no, it's done this way, I'm born Muslim." And I thought that that was a very interesting illustration of the way that she wanted to have this status of being a born Muslim or at least having one of her parents be ethnically Muslim.

Regardless of whether the woman in Michelle's story was a convert or not, the fact that Michelle believed it to be likely is illuminating, as are the reasons she gave for why a person might pretend that they had been raised Muslim their whole lives. As I illustrated in section 6.3.2 in chapter 6, it was common for white converts to express that other non-white Muslims often treated them as though they were not authentic' Muslims. In the interactions outlined in that section, not only did participants express that some non-white Muslims acted as though white converts would always be more ignorant that non-white Muslims when it came to knowledge about Islam, but that the immorality of whiteness would always be attached to them, unless they worked to display greater acts of piety, such as wearing the *burqa* as described above.

Some participants stated that they felt that being a white convert meant that they were exposed to more questions about their conversion, and that they felt alienated by the constant reminders that they were "different". In part, this was due to the fact that the assumption was that a white Muslim must be a convert: Kim hypothesised that converts from other backgrounds were not necessarily as noticeable as converts unless they identified themselves as being a convert, whereas people were immediately able to tell that she was white and therefore unlikely to be a 'born' Muslim. For one participant, Fatima, the extent of the questioning of her religiosity and commitment to Islam because she was a white

convert led her to start avoiding discussions about her racial and ethnic identity, and ultimately to lie about it. Her reasoning behind her response stemmed from a discomfort with the personal questions that people felt entitled to ask her about her identity, religion and pre-conversion life as soon as they found out that she was white, which often forced her to reveal personal information about her family and relationship with her parents:

> There actually was a time, whenever someone would ask me my ethnic background, because I do still get that question a lot, I would just tell them. And that would bring out a whole raft of questions. "Oh when did you convert? How did you convert? Why did you convert?"

To avoid the questioning, Fatima would often tell people that she was half-Pakistani:

> I would just tell people that I was half Pakistani and half white – "Oh, but you look very white, your eyes are so light blue!" "Yeah I look more like my dad." And it did make it easier because then people would just assume I was raised Muslim, whereas beforehand they would ask a lot of questions. You know, how, why, this and that – and it just got to the point where they were asking me very, very personal things and I hadn't known them for very long. So there are a lot of people in my life who still don't know that I converted.

In this situation, Fatima states that she lied not to accrue greater credibility as an authentic Muslim, but to stop people from asking questions that she found invasive. She noted that as soon as she told people that her mother was Pakistani, people were much more likely to accept her as a Muslim, though she adds that that did not always stop people from persistently questioning her.

As well as examples of feeling excluded from Muslim communities and peer groups, some converts indicated that they felt like they no longer belonged in mainstream society, often pointing to their changed relationships with their family, friends and colleagues (some details of which have been discussed in Chapter Five). The way that participants dealt with the social exclusion they

experienced differed from person to person. For some, their response to feeling ostracised by their friends and colleagues was to simply change peer groups, and to avoid interacting or socialising with colleagues outside of work. In relation to Islamophobia he experienced from his workmates, Xander stated, "You have to grow a thick skin and not let it bother you. It does still bother me sometimes though – not even just the Islamophobia, 'cause that's only a few people, but even with the good guys, we're not as - friendly as we used to be. Yeah, there's some tension there." When asked why his relationship with them had changed, he replied, "Like I said before, the alcohol, everything they do is around drinking. But more so than the alcohol itself, but also their stubbornness about not changing anything about themselves or their culture, their work culture, to be more including of other people." Xander differentiates between blatant Islamophobia and subtle forms of exclusion practised by his colleagues, but notes that both have the effect of positioning him outside or on the borders of their group.

Participants who did not visibly identify as Muslim sometimes referred to the concept of "passing," which meant that they were often exposed to racist perceptions and attitudes because they were included as a white person. If they challenged those attitudes, they were sometimes ostracised or excluded from that point on. Max stated that being 'included' as a white person meant that he heard a lot of anti-Muslim racism that he would not have otherwise heard:

> I guess because I'm a white Anglo and not everyone knows that I'm a Muslim so I get to probably see a lot more racism than people who are Muslims or not just even Muslims but people who are from other backgrounds. 'We can say whatever we want in front of him, he isn't going to really care.'

In this quotation, Max positions his whiteness as something that gave him greater access to the racist attitudes of white non-Muslims who assumed that all

white people felt the same as they did. In Cassie's words, because she does not "look Muslim," she "would kind of passively come across some racist stuff that's not directed at me but things that people say and because I'm kind of undercover it's actually really bad in that sense." Like Max and Cassie, Michelle also felt that she was able to pass and be included within conversations because of her whiteness. Michelle indicated that once people found out that she was Muslim, however, she was excluded from certain conversations or topics of discussion:

> Because I don't wear the *ḥijāb* or anything, some people don't know that I'm Muslim and they'll make bad comments about Muslims. And I'll be like "hey, do you know that I'm Muslim?" And they'll just kind of say "Oh… really? Oh… okay." And then things kind of really, they won't be around me as much. So I think in that way it's still – some kind of people have a reaction to it because they don't think that I'm going to be Muslim so they feel free to say what they like. And then when they find out that I am they don't really like that very much.

Michelle remarks that incidents like the one documented above caused her to feel excluded from white communities, as her Muslimness casts her as an outsider because she does not participate in making racist jokes against Muslims.

It was far more likely for participants to describe experiences like the one described by Michelle in terms of feeling included or excluded within white culture and communities, as opposed to a sense that they themselves were no longer white. For example, when asked what his perception of Muslims were after he first converted, Max replied, "At least when I'm around Muslims, I know I can be a Muslim." He added that while it could be annoying to get asked questions about his conversion, it did not bother him as much as how he felt when he was amongst white non-Muslims:

> That's better than getting, like for example one day I'm sitting down having lunch, not on topic, there's about 3-4 people there. Two of them are having a conversation. One guy just looks at me and goes, "Do you drink?" And I say "uh no." And he goes, "Oh why not, aren't you allowed?" And I'm just like, "oh jeez," and stuff like that where it gets to the point where you almost get your guard up so to speak when you're around people who are like the same background as me, they're born in Australia they're from, you know, you do get your guard up.

Max's evident discomfort about being questioned about his personal practices and habits stems from a sense of disconnection from people who are otherwise "the same background as him," but that he does not trust, or cannot let his guard down around.

While most participants' descriptions of being in an 'in between space' socially and culturally were negative in tone, Jason offered a potentially positive outcome of operating in a space which he describes as the "nexus" of two worlds, stating, "I'd like to think that some of my friends have learnt a little bit more about Muslims because of me, maybe become more open-minded." When I prompted him to explain why, Jason stated that the vast majority of his family and social group had never interacted or spoke to a Muslim before him, and their only knowledge about Islam was transmitted to them through (largely negative) news media. Jason suggested that as a white person he was less threatening to his friends and family than a non-white Muslim would be, and so they were comfortable to ask him questions about Islam, even though he felt that sometimes the questions seemed designed to provoke him. Despite this, Jason is confident that some of his peers' attitudes towards Muslims have altered for the better as a result of their interactions with him, suggesting that white converts and indeed, any Muslim converts, may in some situations be a conduit between non-Muslims and Muslims to promote greater intercultural communication. Jason's experience, like Fatima's earlier in this section, suggests once again that Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity may be a salient one

through which to analyse the potentially positive and productive aspects of the 'nexus' or 'in between space' between whiteness and Islam.

In this section, I explored how participants' feelings of belonging and not belonging, of inclusion and exclusion, have been impacted by their conversion to Islam. While some participants stated that they felt little had changed in their lives since they converted, most participants indicated that their change in lifestyle and certain restrictions on things such as alcohol meant that they no longer "fit in" with their non-Muslim colleagues and friends as they had in the past. This appeared to be one of the key challenges for converts, as the development of a support network to act in place of those social networks often took time to establish, if they were established at all. Participants also reflected on the fact that they often felt isolated within Muslim communities as well, and this was often cited as an even bigger challenge for converts, as they hoped to find a sense of belonging within Muslim communities.

The findings of this section indicate that for some participants, they felt that they occupied an in-between space in the middle of two communities, not quite fitting in anywhere, which sometimes manifested in feeling that they were on the borders of whiteness as well. While for many participants, this resulted in a sense of loss – loss of belonging, loss of community – for others, such as Jason and Fatima, their in-betweenness was viewed as a productive space. Their experiences suggest that Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity could well apply to white converts who are seen to disrupt the essentialised categories of Islam and whiteness, by complicating and troubling both identities, and also allowing for greater intercultural communication.

7.5 Attitudes Toward Culture

Participants interviewed demonstrated a variety of different attitudes and responses towards the concept of culture, often revealing how participants felt about whiteness, Australianness, belonging and 'ethnic' cultures in more subtle ways than when they were asked directly about the same concepts. This section will detail two of the most common approaches to culture and cultural practice as discussed by participants in their in-depth interviews. On one hand, a number of participants described adopting certain cultural customs, traditions and attributes associated with a particular ethnic group, often one that their husbands or wives were part of, or alternatively one that may have been dominant or numerous in their neighbourhood. Of these participants, some embraced the cultural customs and traditions of that ethnic group holistically and wholeheartedly, while others integrated parts of it into their lives as it suited them and their families. Examples of cultural attributes that were adopted by converts included such things as food, language, wedding traditions, Eid traditions and gender roles. It should be noted that amongst these participants, most indicated that they approached the adoption of cultural traditions and attributes critically, and rejected elements that they disagreed with or felt went against Islamic principles – often framed as being "just cultural, not Islamic." As was demonstrated in section 6.4, many of the participants interviewed had some experience of being told that something was a religious requirement when it was actually a cultural norm.

On the other hand, some participants actively rejected the idea that converts should adopt a particular 'ethnic' culture. Reasons given for this rejection ranged from believing that there was no need to do so, to consciously wanting to stop the idea that Islam is associated with particular ethnic cultures and not others; in other words, to 'deracialise' Islam to some extent. A small number of participants located their own practice of Islam as acultural, and promoted

what some termed an 'Australian Islam' which would ostensibly be free of the cultural baggage that some ethnic groups brought to Islam. In addition, two participants stated that they made a conscious decision to retain parts of their white culture that they felt did not contradict Islam.

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered during this project suggests that amongst the white converts interviewed, some perpetuated well-worn stereotypes about Muslims. The most common of these included the idea that Muslim societies were more sexist than Western societies, and that non-white Muslims were premodern or primitive in their thinking, due to their adherence to traditions that appeared to be at odds with modern ways of thinking. Such stereotypes were often framed in terms of 'culture' – in other words, the problems that they witnessed within the Muslim community were issues to do with practices and traditions of specific ethnic groups, rather than a problem with Islam. These tropes emerged in interviews with people who chose to adopt certain 'ethnic' customs, as well as those who chose to reject them.

Some participants, such as Michelle, indicated that while they knew Muslims from a diverse range of cultures, they were particularly invested in some ethnocultural groups over others. In Michelle's case, many of her interactions with Muslims were with people of various Arab ancestries, including Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims. She attributed this mostly to the area that she grew up in, in Wiley Park, and the fact that her high school had a high proportion of Arab students. She explained:

> I was around a lot of Arab people so at the time I started to learn to speak Arabic, I started to eat Arabic food, and I think I probably have been to one Caucasian wedding in my life and I've been to at least 25 Arab weddings. So I definitely kind of learnt what would happen at an Arab wedding more than I would know what would go on at a Caucasian wedding.'

Michelle went on to state that she felt this had also been in part due to her marriage to an Arab man soon after her conversion, and her regular contact with his family. Michelle explained that in many ways she felt that she had become, in her words, "Arabised," which for her meant having learnt to "blend in culturally very well with Arabs" and "cope in their particular culture." She actively embraced many aspects of Arab culture such as food and social customs and visualised having "the big Arab wedding."

Fatima described a similar experience to that of Michelle's, whereby her familial connections with a particular culture caused her to become immersed in that culture and its traditions to the point where her biological ancestry started to seem irrelevant. After leaving home at the age of 16, she moved in with a Pakistani couple whom she terms her 'adoptive parents', and describes having picked up much of their cultural practices. When they later helped her find a Pakistani husband, she became even more entrenched and invested in Pakistani culture. She frames this as a positive phenomenon precisely because it gave her connections to a large, well-established Muslim community in Sydney, which she feels gave her stability after her conversion. She qualifies though that she does not take parts of the culture that she disagrees with, specifically sexist attitudes or traditions:

> My husband being Pakistani, there are plenty of sexist things about Pakistani culture. Honestly. He doesn't really follow that, as well. And he's not just like, "You go in the kitchen cos you're a woman and you're supposed to do that." He can't cook so I cook. That's more the reason for that.

She notes that it was her interactions with other Muslims who confirmed for her that many of the things she disagreed with were not religious requirements. Fatima recollects:

Quite frankly I do find that a lot of Middle Eastern cultures can tend to be quite sexist. They can tend to have some – in the West we would call them quite sexist views, and in many ways they are often quite un-Islamic views as well… I think it was a little bit confusing at the time, but my gut feeling was that that was not Islam. Because on the same token I was meeting people of different cultural backgrounds, and plenty of them were honest enough to say "Well my culture is actually pretty sexist, in that we don't think women should work, we don't think women should be outside of the house. But then again, that's not what the Qur'an says." So I did also meet people who were honest enough to talk about it in that way, and that just drove the point home for me even more, that there was a separation between culture and religion. That's always something I've tried to maintain.

Fatima's decision to adopt elements of Pakistani culture was partly a practical one, as she felt that it made her transition into her marriage and relationship with her Pakistani husband and in-laws easier. However, she also notes that she felt some pressure to do so from the broader Pakistani community that she socialised within, as well as other Muslims. Fatima remarked that she had only once had her ability to be a 'real' Muslim questioned because of her whiteness, but that she felt that Muslims were more able to accept her as a Muslim if they thought she had made an effort to appear 'culturally' Muslim as well; in other words, if she adopted customs associated with a cultural group that had a long history of Islam. Speaking of women she met in the Sydney Pakistani community, Fatima stated:

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

When asked why she felt that this was the case, Fatima posited that Islam is a "highly racialised" religion in Australia, and that in order to be accepted she had to be perceived to be racialised too. Within the Pakistani community, that meant adopting Pakistani customs and traditions, and acting less Australian.

Fatima recognised that many of the cultural practices she engaged in to appease this expectation were not necessarily rooted in Islam, but that they still contributed to her Muslimness because they were associated with a culture that was seen to have strong links to Islam, unlike Australianness. In other words, converting to Islam and practising the tenets of Islam were not enough to establish her Muslim identity – she needed to become "more cultural" in order to be socially accepted as a Muslim. Fatima indicated that although she recognised that there was no religious compulsion to do so, she stated that as long as the cultural expectations of her Pakistani family members and the broader Sydney Pakistani community that she socialised with did not conflict with her morals, she was happy to adopt them in order to "meld into the culture and community."

Fatima noted that as well as integrating parts of Pakistani culture into her life and into her identity, she also had to actively leave behind some aspects of her white culture because they actively contradicted Islamic commandments. Fatima stated that it was hard for some of her family to understand; she refers in particular to her aunt, who "...did not like that I could not live what she saw as a typical Australian lifestyle. She thought it was important for me to drink and experiment with drugs, she thought it was important for me to go and sleep with guys, she thought it was important for me to have these sorts of experiences."

Angela's experience was similar to that of Fatima's. She stated that after her marriage to her Sri Lankan husband, she went to great lengths to immerse herself in his culture and community as much as possible. Angela attributed this partly to their decision to live in Sri Lanka for some time early on in their marriage, which meant that it was easier for her to learn to speak Singhalese and cook Sri Lankan food. She adds that she also grew accustomed to wearing

traditional Sri Lankan dress, despite the fact that her urban in-laws themselves wore Western clothing for most of the time, and only wore traditional dress on celebratory occasions. For Angela, her adoption of such customs was important to her because she felt it gave her a sense of "belonging to something." This was particularly significant for Angela because she had lost most of her friends after her conversion, and had unresolved and tense relationships with many of her close family members. Importantly, Angela also refers to feeling that she had not had any culture growing up, and going to a multicultural school, she always felt that she was missing out on something.

Angela described the relationship between culture and religion as one of symbiosis, stressing that: "...you have the religion and the culture, it doesn't have to clash, people try to make out that it clashes but it doesn't have to clash, because I have no clashes between religion and culture. I think it gets on fine." Angela's exposition on culture differs significantly from that of Fatima and other participants who felt that there could be significant conflicts between ethnocultural ideology and Islam. Because she didn't see herself as having a culture beyond that of her adopted Sri Lankan culture, it became clear that when she referred to culture, she did not include Australian culture.

> In the media they say that – we Muslims we should adopt the Australian culture and the Australian lifestyle and so forth, but we have particular dress codes, we have particular food requirements, we have particular requirements for prayer and how we pray and where we pray has to be clean, and so forth. And a lot of things they don't understand.

Other participants felt that rather than being immersed in one ethnic culture, their exposure to a variety of Muslim communities allowed them to absorb a number of cultures. This also meant that they felt they were able to differentiate better between elements and practices that were taught to them as religious and

those that were purely cultural. This was framed as a process, however, which for some took a number of years to establish. Paul viewed his ability to participate in a number of different cultures as a positive thing, because it gave him greater insight into how different people lived and allowed him to "have the best of all worlds." Referring to the fact that he has lived in various parts of Sydney since becoming Muslim, Paul noted:

> Living in so many different places, you start to learn about different cultures a lot more. Like in Greenacre, it's a different ethnic mix to, say, Tempe. And you go to different mosques and even just hearing different languages, and meeting people from all kinds of nationalities… I think it can't help but make you a better person.

Like Angela, Paul felt that as a Muslim he now had access to culture that he didn't before - "I never had a real culture, a strong culture" - later stating, "I was always a little jealous of the kids who got to eat noodles at school. We only ever got ham and cheese sandwiches." For both Paul and Angela, their view of whiteness was that it was acultural, and in some cases, somewhat bland. During his interview, Paul reflected on whether his desire for culture was in part what attracted him to Islam in the first place, stating that, "I converted because I believe that Islam is the one true religion, but you can't ignore other factors that might come into it as well… maybe they're not the *reason* I converted but it plays a role in drawing me to the faith in the first place."

The notion of conversion to Islam as fulfilling the desire for a culture was also raised by Edward. Although he himself indicated that he had never felt the desire to adopt another culture after converting, he attributed it to the fact that he already felt he had a strong culture, due to his Southern European ancestry. However, like Paul, Edward suggested that some converts might try to immerse themselves in another culture because they felt that they lacked culture themselves. He stated:

I certainly know of some purely Anglo converts, and then I know of other converts that are – they're Italian or Greeks and stuff like that. And I think in terms of retaining cultural identity, I think for Anglos given that I don't think there is a strong sense of culture, it's very easy to just adopt a new culture and change your whole life. Whereas I've anecdotally seen with Italian and European converts where culture's been a big part of their life, they've tried to maintain that. Particularly for family. Maybe for some of these Anglo converts that really do sort of get immersed in it, maybe they sort of long for that. And they've never had it. Whereas for us kids growing up, we've always had it. So maybe that's not the part of Islam that we're seeking out. Islam can really be a lot of different things to a lot of different people converting.

Edward's quotation highlights that the concept of white "Anglo" culture or lack thereof is linked to ethnicity as much as to race, and that "ethnic whites" like Italians and Bulgarians (in the case of Daniel) may occupy a different experience in relation to conversion than to Anglo-Australians, given their relatively recent admission into the category of "white" in the Australian context (Dewhirst 2008; Andreoni 2003). While Angela and Paul viewed the lack of culture they associated with whiteness as a negative element of whiteness, converts such as Henry felt that it gave them "an edge on born Muslims." In Henry's mind, white converts were better equipped to practise a pure Islam precisely because they did not have the "cultural baggage that born Muslims have." He stated:

I never really thought of myself as being white, but now that I'm Muslim I can see that it's been a positive thing in some ways because I don't carry all that cultural baggage that born Muslims have. I feel lucky in that respect, like I'm able to see clearer if that makes sense. I've been careful not to get involved with Muslims that are too cultural and think that their way is the only or the right way.

Henry's conceives of his own whiteness as being "acultural," unlike some born Muslims who are "too cultural." A number of assumptions underlie Henry's quotation that require further unpacking. Firstly, he decries the practice of 'cultural Islam.' When prompted as to what cultural Islam is, he gives the

examples of ethnic-oriented mosques where the Friday sermon is given in a language other than English and the expectation that he should change his name to an Arabic name. Henry claims that these cultural expectations and practices are not required within Islam, and thus sully the purity of Islam which he believes "should be kept simple." Thus, the more cultural a non-white Muslim is, the further they are to the true practice of Islam, in Henry's mind. In contrast, Henry views himself and other white converts to be completely acultural. White converts are seen as neutral, uncluttered, a blank slate on which a pure Islam can be inscribed. This construction of whiteness enables white converts to ignore the fact that their values, norms, beliefs and attitudes are just as much culturally influenced as those of non-white Muslims, but that as part of a hegemonic social group, these norms, values etcetera are simply perceived of as natural and common-sense (Dyer 1997). A key outcome of such a belief in one's own neutrality is an inability to acknowledge how the experiences and needs of non-white Muslims are different to those of white Muslims. For example, the conviction that all mosques should provide sermons in English is itself a cultural expectation, but because English is the dominant language in Australia, it is not seen as such. Instead, non-white Muslims are depicted as the problem for not learning English, rather than acknowledging the reasons for why some congregations would prefer their sermons in their first language – such as, because the majority of attendees speak that language more proficiently than English, the imam speaks that language more proficiently than English, there is less chance of misunderstanding, and because mosques are for immigrant Muslim communities often a piece of 'back home' in which they can communicate with members of their community.

Far from being a sentiment that was unique to Henry, the description of whiteness as being free from the cultural baggage that born Muslims carry was

repeated by other participants as well. In those interviews, white converts were often portrayed as being the saviours of Islam in Australia, which was in danger of being eroded by 'culture.' Importantly, some participants also stated that it was a generational gap, and that it was the older immigrant communities that were the real threat to Islam. In his interview, Ali stated that as well as white converts, second and third generation born Muslims from non-white backgrounds were also crucial to the construction of an acultural Islam, as they were often "less likely to practice a strict form of their culture" and be "more critical of parts of their culture that conflicted with Islam." Ali used the example of the difficulties he faced when getting married, stating that his in-laws were strongly opposed to his marriage to his wife, and that this was "because they're the immigrant generation as opposed to the Australian generation." Ali's words raise the prospect of there being many racialised Islams in Australia, insofar as it is interpreted by Muslims themselves, and that the extent of racialisation differs within Muslim communities based on how "Australian" or "immigrant/ethnic" the Muslims are. He added however that while in smaller Australian cities the "Australian generation" bridged ethnic divides because there were far fewer Muslims, in cities with large Muslim communities such as Sydney the same attitude was being passed down to the "Australian generation" as well.

The phenomenon described by Henry and Ali is called "Australian Islam" by Tasneem, who strongly contended that it was "the only way forward" for Australian Muslims. Tasneem stated that it is through the development of an Australian Islam that Muslims can start to become accepted and integrated into Australia more fully. In the above examples, Ali, Henry and Tasneem separate the notion of 'culture' from 'Islam', choosing instead to embrace an Australian identity. Their vision of Australia and an Australian national identity is

equivalent to a blank slate where Muslims can practise a "purer" Islam untainted by ethnocultural baggage. Henry's choice of words reveals that he believes that white converts have greater ability to separate Islam from the non-Islamic cultural customs practised by some non-white Muslims who are "too cultural" – their whiteness is constructed as a neutral subject position which allows them to "see clearer" and remain objective and impartial, unlike non-white Muslims who will always interpret Islam through a culturally-inflected lens.

A growing literature is emerging that discusses the trend towards "de-ethnicising" Islam practised by second-generation immigrant Muslims in Western nations that aim for an Islamic revival, termed 'newer Islamic movements' by Lars Pedersen (1999). De-ethnicisation is viewed as a crucial tool to reviving a truer and more religiously-oriented form of Islam, and is illustrative of the modernist approach taken by Islamic revivalist movements, that reject "ethnic" traditions while simultaneously seeking to more firmly establish Islamic traditions in their lives and as a part of their communities. However, far from being contradictory, the desire amongst some Australian Muslims and in particular, white convert Muslims, to establish a 'pure' Islam in their nation is indicative of the nationalist projects underlying modern Islamic revivalist movements. In the lineage of other scholars before her, Turkish sociologist Yildiz Atasoy posits that "the Islamic revival is far from a traditionalist desire to return to a 'golden age'" (1997, p. 84), and it needs to be understood in a modern context in which Islam is consistently being used for political and often nationalist goals. The search for a de-ethnicised, de-racialised and whitened "Australian Islam" cannot be divorced from this context, even in countries where Muslims are a minority population. In Australia, the desire to reinforce an Australian Islam is not manifested in a "political struggle for state

control" (1997, p. 84), as Atasoy contends was the case in Turkey, but to unify Muslims by appealing to a national, Australian Islam which can be created by integrating Muslims into the existing nationalist political and cultural systems of Australia. The purpose of the "Australian Islam" alluded to by Tasneem is not to establish an Islamic government or a system of Sharia in Australia, but to de-ethnicise and de-racialise Islam so that it is better able to be absorbed into the broader Australian polity and culture.

This position is clearly exemplified in Tasneem's interview. Tasneem locates the disunity and lack of cohesion amongst Muslim communities with their adherence to separate ethnic cultures and traditions. Tasneem suggests:

> For a lot of Muslims, they equate the religion with their culture, because that's what they grew up with. 'This is the way we do things around here.' That's why we don't have unity in the Muslim community, because a lot of people look down on other cultures as not Muslims, as not practising the religion as well as they can. So there's this attitude that everybody is… I often get people telling me, 'Oh you know, you can't trust the Egyptians.' They categorise it. A lot of Muslims are really quite racist. It's only the young people these days that are Aussie, that I don't find that racism. But certainly amongst the… even my own husband, he used to, and this was within his community – when we were interviewing for the school, the staff. The first thing, if they were Lebanese, the first thing he would ask them is what village do you come from? What's your family? To me that was irrelevant. Was this person qualified? Did they understand the job? It's very nepotistic.

In the above quotation, Tasneem draws a broad brush to indicate that Muslims who were mired in cultural traditions were more likely to be ethnocentric and racist towards other cultural groups, as well as nepotistic. She situates "young people these days that are Aussie" in opposition to the older first generation migrant groups in which she is more likely to find ethnocentric and narrow-minded attitudes. Tasneem's interview indicates that she views Australian culture to be less racist and more inclusive of multiculturalism because it is

acultural and not strongly attached to any one culture, thus denying that Australian culture does indeed exist and is often deployed in the furtherance of Australian nationalism. Tasneem's binary construction of "immigrant" Muslims versus "Aussie" Muslims is highly racialised, and implies that the more integrated Muslims are into white Australian culture, the less likely they are to be racist, ethnocentric and narrow-minded Her reasoning exemplifies a colour/power evasive racial repertoire through which she denies the role of white supremacy in the construction of Australian nationalism, and her own complicity in that nationalism through her suggestion that Muslims need to become 'more Aussie' (read white) in order to be better Muslims. In her interview, Tasneem emphasised her perception of the racism of non-white Muslims, while downplaying Islamophobia towards Muslims, stating that she had very rarely experienced Islamophobia and that that was likely because she was well-spoken and had a classy accent. Through such statements, Tasneem reveals that she believes that Islamophobia is racialised, as it is not just about her being Muslim but also about her sounding Australian, but also implicitly places the blame for experiencing Islamophobia on non-white Muslims who aren't well-spoken like her.

Tasneem's views are highlighted in her response to my question about the concept of an Australian Islam:

> That's something that will not eventuate for another ten years, I reckon. We're getting there. I think it's a more egalitarian Islam. I think it's a less ritualised Islam. It's in many ways more liberal and – an Australian Islam will be a lot less suspicious of institutions and government. So you'll find that the Pakistanis don't trust the politicians, and the Lebanese only trust Lebanese politicians. They don't have the confidence to cope with the Australian society. And they don't know how to deal with a lot of the institutions here. And they think they do, and they argue a lot. And they go around demanding their rights when they don't really have any rights and they don't demand their rights when they do. Whereas I think that Australian Muslims are a lot more capable of dealing with that kind of stuff. And they're a lot more relaxed. Got a sense of humour.

Can joke. Can do crazy things. I think this is where we are starting to see the development of a civilisation.

Tasneem's quotation reveals a dualistic attitude that Muslims who reject or deprioritise their ethnic culture in favour of an Australian culture are less rigid, more relaxed and jovial, and more able to seamlessly engage with and integrate into the dominant Australian polity. Her conception of a 'civilisation' is one that is built on Australian nationalism, and which effectively is assimilated into Australian culture. Her view is similar to that of those expressed by relatives of participants, detailed in Chapter Five, who felt that Islam was too rigid and extreme and encouraged their children and siblings to practices a 'more secular' form of Islam. Although she acknowledges the hybridity of their identities, she sees more merit in the adoption of Australianness.

Like Tasneem and Xander, Daniel actively rejected the adoption of another ethnic culture's traditions and customs, particularly where such traditions were posited as religious when they were not. Referring to the first generation Turkish and Afghan immigrants he lived with in Auburn, he stated, "I developed an issue with them because particularly first generation migrant Muslims can have this love for their particular culture or their particular way of doing things, which is often justified through *dīn*… So eventually I kind of began to have some frictions over that." Daniel added that he actively resisted "being pulled into the cultural category" because he wanted to highlight that it was possible to retain one's cultural identity after converting to Islam, and that there was a clear separation between the religion of Islam and the traditions of what he termed "Islamised cultures." In doing so, Daniel attempted to assert his own cultural identity in the face of what he perceived to be an attempt to assimilate him into another culture.

As well as resisting cultural erasure, however, Daniel added that an ignorance about the differences between culture and religion could also have a negative impact on the post-conversion experiences of converts, as they were more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation from certain groups. He stated:

> I mean it's good, because the sooner a convert recognises the difference between culture and religion, the sooner they get out of some stuff that they shouldn't be involved in anyway. 'Cause I've seen some stuff online of converts… That's what I mean, when converts realise what's up, the sooner the better.

Daniel's warning was reiterated by other participants as well, some of whom phrased their distaste for certain practices within Muslim communities by stating, "If I had met Muslims before I became Muslim, I wouldn't have converted." In participants' interviews, this statement was often made in reference to practices that they witnessed amongst Muslims that they viewed as being cultural, or following a strict interpretation of Islam that they felt did not align with their own approach to Islam. This is highlighted in Ali's interview, who related an experience which he stated left him questioning his very faith in Islam. The incident took place soon after a Muslim man he had met at university moved into his Kingswood flat with him:

> He came back one night with Mum's kitchen knife and it had blood on it. I thought he murdered somebody. Turned out he killed a dog. Seen him in the street and he was black. I didn't even – I was watching like – some science program. He comes in and he's holding my mum's kitchen knife which she gave me when I moved in, it's got blood on it, he's got blood running down his leg. I said, "What the hell have you done?" He said, "I killed that black dog that lives in that street over there." I said, "You killed someone's dog with my mum's kitchen knife?" He said, "I had to. It's a duty. If you see a black dog, kill it, even in the masjid."

Ali goes on to state that the incident affected him deeply. Even after he learned that the man had taken a very literal and non-contextualised interpretation of a *ḥadīth* and that it was not a requirement upon Muslims to kill all black dogs as

he had been told, Ali explained that the fact that there were Muslims who would accept such readings unquestioningly bothered him greatly, attributing it partly to an uncritical tradition of some Islamised cultures.

In this section, I have demonstrated that for some participants, their engagement with non-white ethnic cultures was directly influenced by their attitudes about their own racial identity as well as other racial identities. The post-conversion narratives of some converts indicate that they felt that whiteness was acultural, and that they did not have a culture themselves. The response to this recognition differed between converts – while some took it as an opportunity to immerse themselves into a community and culture that was underpinned by a strong Islamic identity, others chose to actively reject the invitation to adopt another ethnic culture, and instead stayed committed to white Australian culture. For many of the participants who fall into the latter category, they viewed adherence to another, racialised cultures as a barrier to a pure Islam, unlike whiteness which allowed Muslims a neutral, blank slate identity through which to access the true Islam.

This section has also introduced the concept of "Australian Islam," and demonstrated how some Islamic revivalism in Australia and indeed worldwide has sought to de-ethnicise, whiten and some may say, homogenise, diverse Muslim communities in this quest for the true Islam. In contrast to Muslims who believe that whiteness is incompatible with Islam, this project of Australian Islam views 'cultural/immigrant Muslims' as the problem, and white converts and 'acultural' "Aussie Muslims" (second and third generation non-white Muslims) as the solution. The aims of this project of Australian Islam aligns and supports the current Australian polity and through it. Australian nationalism, as it locates problems within the Muslim community with the culture of non-white Muslims and their inability to integrate into Australian

society and its institutions. Proponents of this perspective deployed a colour/power evasion repertoire that failed to acknowledge that "Australianness" was as much as a culture as any other, and could also be racist, ethnocentric and narrow-minded, and demonstrated how colour/power evasive repertoires can operate through culture as code for 'race,' in an era where explicit references to race are largely frowned upon.

7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attended to the question of how white converts to Islam perceive, reinforce, challenge, disown and otherwise negotiate their whiteness before and after their conversion to Islam. For several of the participants, talking about whiteness was a difficult task for them, and they did not discuss their views on whiteness or their racial identities in depth. Many of these participants enacted what Frankenberg terms "colour or power evasive" racial repertoires, but their interviews revealed that there were differences in how these repertoires were deployed, and suggests that the subtleties of the racial repertoire could be further attended to in her schema. Others demonstrated a keen and often insightful understanding of race and whiteness, demonstrating race cognisance; however, their expression of this cognisance varied significantly from person to person, suggesting that Frankenberg's schema could be expanded upon and her categories further delineated to capture the complexity of white people's interpretations of whiteness and its role in their own lives.

The findings of my research indicated that amongst participants who were comfortable to talk about race and whiteness, converting to Islam either precipitated their cognisance, reinforced their perception of themselves as

white, or made them feel 'less white' than they were previously. These responses often arose out of a combination of their interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims, as documented in Chapters Five and Six, and their own political, ideological and intellectual leanings. While some participants expressed their feelings of being a white Muslim through explicit references to race and whiteness, others did so through more indirect ways, by talking about their feelings of belonging and exclusion, and their attitudes towards 'culture,' which was often seen through racialised lenses.

This chapter has highlighted that for many of the white converts to Islam that I interviewed for my thesis, race plays a significant role in their day to day interactions and exchanges as a Muslim, and that their understandings of race are sometimes refracted through their lived experience of 'Muslim-ness.' It has suggested that the confluence of their racial and religious identities can create a sense of being 'in between' two worlds. Being located in this nexus is for some participants isolating, unsettling and destabilising, whereas others find it liberating in its fluidity, because it challenges and disrupts dominant ideas about what a Muslim can – or should – be. It has been suggested as well that white converts could potentially act as an avenue towards more dialogue between white non-Muslims and non-white Muslims, because they straddle both worlds. While this is a question that cannot be answered comprehensively by this thesis, it is certainly a possible area for further research.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has utilised the conceptual framework of racialisation, and the unsettling of whiteness to explore the lived experiences of white converts to Islam in Australia. Australia has been constructed as a nation where Islam is broadly racialised as a 'non-white' religion. My in-depth interviews with white converts not only contributes to our understanding of the Australian experience of religious conversion to Islam, but also demonstrates how these experiences can be understood through the lenses of racialisation and whiteness. In this chapter, I compile the research findings of the previous four discussion chapters and suggest ways in which these findings can contribute new insights to the existing literature on conversion to Islam, the operation of whiteness in Australia, and the sociological analysis of the racialisation of religion. As well as outlining how my findings have addressed my original research aims, I highlight areas for future research that could further our understanding of racialisation and whiteness as it relates to Muslim communities.

Several research findings emerged from this doctoral project, which is the first qualitative study of white converts to Islam in Australia and one of the very few studies on Muslim converts in Australia generally (Stephenson 2011; Woodlock 2010; Alam 2012). By using the conceptual frames of racialisation and whiteness, I highlighted the disparate ways in which white Muslim converts can reinforce or subvert existing racial structures in Australia which position

whiteness in opposition to Islam. The following sections will outline the key research findings of this thesis, drawn from the four discussion chapters (Chapter Four to Seven).

8.2 Empirical Contribution to Studies of Religious Conversion

In embarking on this doctoral project I did not set out to uncover the reasons why white Australians chose to convert to Islam, given the substantial amount of existing empirical and theoretical studies on motivations for religious conversion. However, after my thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, it became apparent that the interviews provided a rich source of qualitative data about the participants' pre-conversion religious histories, contact with Muslims and motivations for conversion. The conversion narratives of 'new Muslims' are noticeably lacking from the current literature on the Muslim experience in Australia, and so the inclusion of their conversion journeys serves to expand the scholarship on the Muslim experience in Australia. My findings on conversion motivations also contribute empirical data to the sociology of conversion studies, which is demonstrably lacking in Australian Muslim voices.

The vast majority of participants in this project identified that prior to their conversion to Islam they had been Christian, with a minority of participants claiming that they had been agnostic or atheist. Among those who had been Christian previously, participants varied in their assessments of their religious conviction and level of practice, with most stating that they had been "nominal" or "non-practising" Christians, and a far smaller number identifying themselves as having been "religious Christians." These findings were not surprising, as previous academic literature on conversion to Islam in other Western Muslim-minority countries has found a similar pattern of conversion from Christianity.

The smaller number of prior atheists and agnostics can additionally be explained with reference to religious demographic data from the most recent Australian Census from 2011, which indicates that 61.1% of Australians identified as Christian compared to 22.3% of Australians who subscribed to no religion.

The reasons why the participants of this project converted to Islam varied, but overall reflected the pre-existing literature on conversion. Only two of the participants in this study explicitly stated that their conversion was 'for marriage,' however a large number of participants stated that they were initially introduced to Islam through their relationships with Muslims. Many participants described their conversion as an "intellectual decision," which was in some cases juxtaposed against an emotional or mystical experience. These narratives often stressed the role of rational thinking, critical analysis, reading and research in their journeys, with some participants citing that they had intentionally searched for fallacies within Islam and it was the absence of inconsistencies in the religion that had led to the eventual conversion. A smaller group of participants described their conversion journeys as being spiritual, emotional or metaphysical. For some of the converts interviewed, their experiences did not fit neatly into any single category provided by Lofland's and Skovond's schema, and may have crossed two or more categories at any one time, thus highlighting the complexity of the conversion process.

Importantly, however, this thesis moves away from an Orientalist fascination with the reasons for why people convert to Islam, and contributes to the study of religious conversion to Islam by documenting the post-conversion experiences of participants – an area that had not been addressed as thoroughly in the existing literature with its disciplinary preference toward psychology. In particular, my project focused on how white converts negotiated their white

racial identity after their conversion and how their whiteness impacted on their post-conversion experiences, which to date has only been explored by three other researchers, two of whom only published their first articles on the topic in the last two years and neither of which were based in Australia (Galonnier 2015; Moosavi 2014, 2015). The focus of this doctoral thesis is thus novel while still speaking to questions which are gaining notable interest internationally. The following sections detail the contributions that this doctoral project makes to the sociology of racialisation and whiteness.

8.3 Utility of 'Racialisation' and 'Whiteness'

One of the aims of this doctoral project was to explore the utility of the concept of racialisation to understanding Muslim experiences in white dominant countries such as Australia. This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature that argues that the religion of Islam is a racialised one that is juxtaposed against the 'unraced' whiteness of the West (Dunn et al 2007; Galonnier 2015; Humphrey 2007; Joshi 2006; Kyriakides et al 2009; Meer & Modood 2009; Moosavi 2015; Poynting et al 2004; Selod & Embrick 2013). Most of the previous literature deals with macro-level racialisation deployed through institutions, legislation and policy, social structures and public discourses about Muslims. However, my research has detailed how this racialisation is experienced at the micro-level by white converts who enter Islam, moving from an "unraced" or invisible racial positioning to a highly racialised one.

Interviews with white converts to Islam revealed that racializing practices and discourses that positioned Islam as incompatible with whiteness were deployed by both non-Muslims and Muslims in their interactions with white converts. In interactions with non-Muslims, this was done by explicitly framing Islam as a

non-white race, or through the more subtle approach of constructing Islam as antagonistic to the Australian nation (which is underpinned by a national construction of whiteness).

The idea that the religion of Islam is a non-white race was expressed through three key frames:

1) Converts were no longer seen as being white after their conversion;

2) Racialised abuse directed to the converts; and

3) White converts were seen as 'race traitors.'

Many participants described incidents in which they felt that they were no longer seen as 'white' by non-Muslim friends, family members and strangers. Sometimes, the charge of having left whiteness was explicit, and participants were told outright that they were not white anymore. Other times, they were told that they had 'become Arab.' This sentiment arose mostly when participants were wearing visible markers of Islam, such as *ḥijāb* or a *kufi.* Unlike abstract and hidden cultural inscriptions such as belief or prayer, Islamic clothing is of the body just as much as it is on the body, as I argued in Chapter Five with reference to the work of Al-Saji (2010). As a result, the racialisation of the *ḥijāb* and the *kufi* is closely tied to the racialisation of bodies that occurs against non-white peoples who are racialised for their physical bodily features. Other examples of incidents in which participants were made aware of the fact that their conversion meant that others may see them as having changed race or acted against their race included racialised abuse and the charge of race treason.

Racialising discourses were also found to be manifest in constructions of Australianness, and the implication that white converts had ceased to be "Australian." My thematic analysis uncovered four key frames that spoke to this construction:

1) Islam as rigid and contrary to the aims and ideals of secularism;

2) Islam as a threat to the Australian nation;

3) Islam as culturally foreign; and

4) Islam as oppressive towards women.

By analysing these frames as they appeared in participants' stories, this research project found that the juxtaposition of Islam as oppositional to Australian culture and the Australian 'way of life' relies on the construction of Muslim as a racialised identity, unlike whiteness which is normative and 'unraced', and secondly, the more cultural capital a person accrues from their whiteness, the larger their claim to being Australian. The identification of the seven expressions discussed in this thesis contributes to the study of racialisation by highlighting the key frames through which the racialisation of Islam is operationalised in an Australian context.

Another important finding of this thesis is that participants indicated that non-white Muslims had dualistic and essentialised views of Islam and whiteness that constructed Islam as incompatible with whiteness. This was made apparent to white converts through both the questioning and glorification of their convert status. For some Muslims, whiteness was so embedded in Western hegemony, colonialism and/or immorality, all of which were seen as oppositional to Islam and the Muslim experience in the West, that white converts were viewed with suspicion as potentially being fake Muslims. Some participants stated that they felt they were forced to prove themselves by being exceptionally pious and practising, or by making a concerted effort to adopt the cultural practices of a non-white cultural group. Other participants stated that their whiteness was glorified by non-white Muslims and they were seen to be better and more pious Muslims because they had to make a greater 'jump' from whiteness into Islam, where whiteness is coded as both secular and Christian at

the same time. Although they manifest in different ways, both views position Islam and whiteness as two dichotomous and oppositional identifications.

These findings make an important contribution to the study of the racialisation of Islam, which has typically examined racialisation as a top down approach and has not yet adequately addressed how racialised groups may themselves participate in racializing structures. As this doctoral project focused only on the experiences of white converts to Islam, I did not have the capacity to explore this issue further by questioning non-white Muslims about their perception of whiteness. However, given that there is a scarcity of literature on the question of how non-white Muslims perceive white people in white dominant nations, these findings point to a potentially fertile area for future research to help extend our current understandings of whiteness and of racialisation.

8.4 Australia's Religious Identity

The proposition that Islam is a religion that is racialised as non-white in Australia gives rise to questions about the religious coding of whiteness. As I stated in my review of the literature in section 2.4, several sociologists of religion and sociologists of race have contended that 'the West' and Europe has for several centuries been articulated through reference to a white racial identity in conjunction with a Christian religious identity (Daulatzai 2012). Similar arguments have been made in the specifically Australian context, with scholars such as Farida Fozdar (2011) and Holly Randell-Moon (2006) making convincing arguments for the centrality of Christianity to the construction of Australian nationhood through their analysis of political speeches and parliamentary debates (see also; Casey 2006; Crabb 2009; Maddox 2005; Sunderland 2007; Warhurst 2007). It was on the basis of this research that I

developed my fourth research aim. Interestingly, this research project found that Christianity did not feature as strongly in the interview data collected during the course of this project as these previous Australian studies would suggest they may have. Instead, participants were more likely to state that their family and close friends juxtaposed the hypervisibility and perceived rigidity of Islam with a secularism that they felt aligned with Australia's "laid back" national identity. This finding indicates that the prevalence of Christian terms and motifs in Australia's public life (such as in politics and the commercial sphere) may not be as clearly identifiable in the private spheres of home and family. Alternately, it could be argued that in these spaces, Christianity has successfully recreated itself as secularism, as is contended by sociologists of religion such as Gil Anidjar and Talal Asad. My research makes a significant contribution to the existing Australian literature on Australia's religious identity by demonstrating how the theories that Anidjar and Asad have examined in light of other Western contexts operate within an Australian national context.

The majority of my participants described Australia as having a "broadly secular" religious identity, but they infer a Christian core. It suggests that participants are aware of the central role of Christianity in Australian nationhood while simultaneously contending that the negative reactions of their friends and family members to their conversion was due to their perception that Islam was too overt and visible in contradiction with secular Australia. This finding is encapsulated in the words of participants who indicated that "being casually Buddhist" or converting to a different "spirituality" that entailed a belief in the supernatural but no overt religious *practices* would have engendered far less concern and hostility amongst their family members and friends. The problem appears to be less about leaving

Christianity, as many of the participants indicated that their families were nominal Christians who did not follow the doctrines and practices of Christianity themselves, but the fact that they had joined a religion that had strict sets of doctrines and religious practices at all.

These findings make an important contribution to the sociology of whiteness and national identity which has not dealt sufficiently with its religious dimension. It suggests that secularism, and specifically a form of secularism that is essentially 'Christianity rebranded,' has in the modern era come to be synonymous with whiteness and the West – not as a replacement for Christianity, but in addition to Christianity, which is possible through the 'reincarnation' of Christianity that Anidjar refers to. White converts to Islam are seen to become less white not because of their departure from Christianity, but because of their departure from a secular lifestyle which is constructed as integral to Australian culture, Australian values and the Australian way of life. While this is not true for all participants, of course, as some stated that they were religious Christians prior to their conversion to Islam, the idea that a move away from secularism was indicative of a corresponding departure from whiteness emerged as a strong theme in the interviews, and is a key finding of this research project. This thesis thus builds on the work of Fozdar and Randell-Moon by interrogating the salience of Anidjar's and Asad's theories of secularism and applying them in an Australian context.

8.5 Constructing, Disrupting and Negotiating White Identities

In Chapter Seven, I returned to one of the central aims of this doctoral project, which was to explore how white converts to Islam negotiated their racial identity post-conversion. I began this chapter by examining how participants

constructed their whiteness generally, and employed Frankenberg's schema of what I call "racial repertoires" to do so. I found that participants exhibited either 'race cognisance' or 'power/colour evasion' repertoires but not 'essentialist racism,' to use Frankenberg's language. Often, participants deployed a mixture of both repertoires, which suggests that Frankenberg's schema could be further delineated or even extended to allow for the subtle differences in how the repertoires she identifies are deployed. For example, while some race cognisant participants exhibited strong feelings of guilt about their whiteness, others indicated that their anti-racist politics allowed them to distance themselves from their whiteness, leading to a very specific form of colour/power evasion.

The question of how white people experience white identities has been well attended to in the literature, although it is undoubtedly focused on the United States of America. There is a paucity of empirical research on the topic in Australia, with noticeable exceptions in the work of Jane Durie (2003) and Emma Kowal (2012). This thesis contributes innovative insights to this field by not only introducing more Australian perspectives, but by exploring what happens to a person's white racial identity when they convert to a religion that is racialised as non-white. This research project found that among the white converts interviewed, there were three responses: participants felt that there had been no change in their racial identity (the majority of participants), participants felt that they had 'left' whiteness or were situated on the borders of whiteness, and finally, participants felt that their conversion revealed or reinforced their whiteness.

Amongst participants who felt that their whiteness has been revealed or reinforced to them after their conversion, they stated that becoming Muslim made them conscious of their whiteness in a way that they had not recognised

before, or alternatively made them more aware of the privilege that their whiteness afforded them in mainstream society. For some, this came about through the process of entering a religion racialised as 'non-white'. Gaining access to racialised Muslim communities gave them insight into how their whiteness operated and the privileges it afforded them compared to the racism that they witnessed against other, non-white Muslims. For others, the fact that they were racialised as white became apparent to them some time after conversion, after receiving "special treatment" from non-white Muslims, or feeling that their whiteness was glorified by born Muslims. Still others stated that they became aware of their own whiteness through their interactions with non-Muslims who called them race traitors.

Some participants indicated that they felt less white after their conversion, or even that they had left whiteness altogether. In other words, the racialisation process appeared to them to work effectively; their entry into a racialised religion meant that they were perceived as non-white by some Muslims and non-Muslims, with mixed consequences. This was transmitted to the participants through racialised abuse and being told that they were no longer white by non-Muslims, or being accepted into Muslim communities on the basis of how much they embraced their new racialised status by adopting the cultural traditions of existing racialised Muslim communities. Of those participants who described feeling less white than before, some also expressed that they did not feel like they belonged anywhere; that they were stuck in between two worlds, neither of which truly accepted them.

My study of how white converts described their sense of racial identity after their conversion adds new insights into the relationship between race and religion in an Australian context, thereby contributing to the sociology of both whiteness and racialisation. While studies of whiteness have already attended

to the issue of people moving in and out of whiteness, there had been little research on how one's religious identity can inform one's racial positioning in terms of whiteness. My research has also contributed new empirical knowledge to the examination of the racialisation of religion, which is an emerging area of study.

8.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A number of limitations of this project and directions for future research have been identified throughout the course of this thesis, but it is useful to reiterate them here. Throughout the course of this project, it became apparent that there was limited academic research available on Muslim converts to Islam in Australia, and references to statistics in media articles about Muslim converts were often drawn from other countries or were guesses drawn anecdotally from one or two religious organisations. While the qualitative research methods I chose for this project were the most suitable for the aims of this project, a comprehensive national quantitative study on Muslim converts would be useful for future research in the area, and to better place the findings of my current research in a national context.

The decision to only interview white converts to Islam stemmed from my overarching research question and allowed me to fulfil my research aims. However, when analysing the interview transcripts with regards to how non-Muslims and non-white Muslims constructed whiteness and Islam through racialised frames, it became clear that there were significant limitations in what the interview transcripts allowed me to say. While I could comment on how interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims made the participants feel about their racial identities, and analyse their interpretations of those interactions, I

had to be careful to avoid projecting my analyses onto the third parties that the participants referred to, as they were not the subjects of the interviews. For example, while I could comment on how participants' interpreted remarks from non-white Muslims about the immorality of whiteness, and how it impacted on their sense of their racial identity, I was wary of making the claim that non-white Muslims believe whiteness to be immoral as I had not spoken to non-white Muslims themselves about their thoughts on the matter. I had anticipated in advance that this would be a limitation, but I had not anticipated the dearth of academic literature on the topic of how non-white subjects generally, and non-white Muslims specifically, perceive whiteness. This signals an interesting and relevant area for future research to contribute to more multi-faceted understandings of whiteness.

A third limitation of this research project was that I only began to ask participants about what 'Australian Islam' means to them over halfway through the interviews. Given the rich data that emerged when I did start to ask that question, it is disappointing that I did not ask it from the beginning, as I suspect that I would have uncovered more diversity of views on what is a relevant and interesting question. If future research were to address the question of Muslim engagements with Australian nationhood again, it could be useful to broaden the sample group to include non-converts and non-white Muslims. This would enable scholars to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the emergence of 'Australian Islams,' and how they interact with existing constructions of 'Australianness' which may or may not serve to exclude Muslims from Australia's national identity.

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GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

This thesis utilises the ALA-LC (American Library Association – Library of Congress) method of transliteration.

ʿAbāyah

A loose cloak/dress worn by some Muslim women.

Al-Fātiḥah

'The Opening', an important verse of the Qurʾan which is recited in daily prayer and is the first chapter in compilations of the Qurʾan.

Alḥamdulillāh

'All praise is due to God', a very common exclamation of acceptance and praise

Burqa

Usually refers to an over garment like an *ʿabāyah* but with a semi-transparent piece of fabric which, when worn with a *niqāb*, covers the entire face.

Daʾwah

'Invitation (to Islam)'. Similar to 'proselytise' in English but refers to efforts to increase religious practice within the Muslim community as much as seeking conversion outside it.

Dīn

'Religion' or 'faith'.

Dhikr

'Remembrance (of God)'. Repetition of important phrases or supplications, often counted using *'tasbih'* (prayer beads).

Ḥadīth

Collected narrations about the life and religious practice of the Prophet Mohammed.

Ḥajj

Pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of faith in Islam.

Ḥalāl

'Permissible.' A phrase from Islamic jurisprudence which classifies actions according to levels of permissibility.

Ḥarām

'Impermissible'/'prohibited.' A phrase from Islamic jurisprudence which classifies actions according to levels of permissibility.

Ḥijāb

A screen or veil, most often used to refer to a headscarf which covers the hair but not the face.

Ḥijābi	Colloquial; a woman who wears the *ḥijāb*.
ʾImān	'Belief'/'personal faith'. Refers most simply to a Muslim's intellectual acceptance of the theological tenets of Islam.
Jāhilīyyah	'Ignorance (of God)'. Usually used to refer to pre-Islamic Arabia, but is sometimes used to refer to the period prior to an individual's conversion or sometimes Western societies generally.
Jihād	'Struggle', refers to both the military and individual efforts of Muslims.
Jumuʿah	Friday congregational prayers.
Kāfir	'Disbeliever' or 'non-believer' of Islam
Keffiyeh	A square patterned scarf worn as a headdress. It has been a male fashion in the Levant and Arabian Peninsula for several centuries.
Khalas	'It's finished'/'that's enough.'
Kufi	A brimless hat traditionally worn by Muslim men.
MāshāʾAllāh	'God willed it', an exclamation of gratitude, admiration or amazement
Najas	Major ritual impurity, a term used in Islamic jurisprudence.
Nikāḥ	An Islamic marriage contract or the ceremony where it is signed. Often used as a shorthand for 'wedding.'
Niqāb	A face veil which usually covers the entire face save the eyes.
Salat	Ritual prayer. One of the five pillars of Islam and an obligatory religious duty for every Muslim.
Shahādah	The Islamic 'testification of faith', namely the phrase in Arabic; *'lā ʾilāha ʾillā-llāh, muḥammadur-rasūlu-llāh'*; 'There is nothing worthy of worship save God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God'. *Shahādah* is one of the 5 'pillars of Islam' and recitation of the phrase is the act by which a person converts to Islam.

Shaykh	An honorific title usually used to refer to Islamic scholars.
Subḥān'Allāh	'Glory to God', an exclamation of awe and sometimes bewilderment
Thawb	An ankle length robe worn by men.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Summary of Participant Profiles

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Appendix E: Coding Framework

APPENDIX A

Summary of Participant Profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Years since conversion	Local Government Area	Country of birth
Michelle	Female	29	11	Sydney	Australia
Stephanie	Female	33	12	Liverpool	Germany
Omar	Male	45	22	Campbelltown	Australia
Liam	Male	35	8	Auburn	Australia
Tasneem	Female	60	38	Parramatta	Australia
Ben	Male	34	12	Cumberland	Scotland
Cassie	Female	27	5	Georges River	Australia
Penny	Female	23	2	Canterbury-Bankstown	Australia
Paul	Male	33	11	Kogarah	Australia
Salwa	Female	70	25	Cumberland	Australia
Bridget	Female	32	10	Canterbury-Bankstown	Australia
Edward	Male	39	4	Canterbury-Bankstown	Australia
Katherine	Female	24	3	Hills Shire	England
Ahmed	Male	40	18	N/A	Australia
Fatima	Female	23	7	Parramatta	Australia
Xander	Male	28	5	Burwood	Australia
Ali	Male	40	19	Penrith	Australia
Belinda	Female	34	5	Auburn	Australia
Florian	Male	43	18	Georges River	France
Saffiah	Female	35	15	Hills Shire	New Zealand
Jason	Male	29	4	Sutherland Shire	Australia
Jim	Male	46	1	Hills Shire	Australia
Max	Male	27	8	Cumberland	Australia
Imogen	Female	30	7	Fairfield	Australia
Henry	Male	36	9	Campbelltown	New Zealand
Daniel	Male	28	6	Hornsby Shire	Bulgaria
Michael	Male	37	2	Pittwater	Australia
James	Male	36	9	Ryde	Australia
Ibrahim	Male	20	4	Inner West	Australia

APPENDIX B

University of
Western Sydney
Bringing knowledge to life

Participant Information Sheet (General)

Project Title: Race in the Lives of White Converts to Islam

Project Summary: The purpose of this research project is to investigate how white Muslim converts experience race after their conversion.

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Oishee Alam, PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney.

How is this study being paid for?

The study is being funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award through the Australian government, as well as the University of Western Sydney.

What will I be asked to do?

Participation in the study involves taking part in an interview which will be audio-recorded. The interview will be focused on questions regarding personal background information, contact with Islam and eventual conversion, perception of cultural and racial identity, responses from Muslims and non-Muslims following conversion, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of the role of religion in Australia, particularly within Australian institutions.

How much of my time will I need to give?

The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

What specific benefits will I receive for participating?

Participation in this study will provide you with an opportunity to discuss and reflect on your experiences as a white convert to Islam. Your participation will aid in adding to the literature about Muslim converts' experiences post-conversion.

Will the study involve any discomfort for me? If so, what will you do to rectify it.

The main issues covered during the interview are unlikely to cause any discomfort or distress. However, if something upsetting does come up, such as talking about personal experiences of racism, you are free to skip any questions without explanation, leave the discussion without explanation or take a break from participating at any time. If you require support services, free counselling is available through Lifeline (24 hours; 131 114) and Centrelink (131 794).

How do you intend on publishing the results.

The results will be disseminated through the researcher's doctoral thesis, academic journal papers and at academic conferences. Only the researcher will have access to identifiable information on participants, and identifiable information will never be published. De-identified results from the study may also be used in future related research projects and resulting publications by the researcher, such as studies relating to Islamophobia, racism, Muslims and Muslim converts. The information from this project is intended to be

used for establishing a database/data collection/register for future use by the researcher, for which ethical approval will be sought.

There are a number of government initiatives in place to centrally store research data and to make it available for further research. For more information, see http://www.ands.org.au/ and http://www.rdsi.uq.edu.au/about. Regardless of whether the information you supply or about you is stored centrally or not, it will be stored securely and it will be de-identified before it is made to available to any other researcher.

Can I withdraw from the study?
Participation is entirely voluntary: and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate, you can withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and without any consequences.

Can I tell other people about the study?
Yes, you can tell other people about the study by providing them with the chief investigator's contact details. They can contact the chief investigator to discuss their participation in the research project and obtain an information sheet.

What if I require further information?
When you have read this information, Oishee Alam will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Oishee Alam (PhD candidate) at o.alam@uws.edu.au or 0434 19 33 58. Alternatively, Professor Kevin Dunn can be contacted at k.dunn@uws.edu.au or (02) 4736 0873.

What if I have a complaint?
This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H10137.

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Office of Research Services on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 Fax +61 2 4736 0013 or email humanethics@uws.edu.au.

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form.

APPENDIX C

University of
Western Sydney

Participant Consent Form

This is a project specific consent form. It restricts the use of the data collected to the named project by the named investigators.

Note: If not all of the text in the row is visible please 'click your cursor' anywhere on the page to expand the row. To view guidance on what is required in each section 'hover your cursor' over the bold text.

Project Title:

I,.............................., consent to participate in the research project titled 'Race in the Lives of White Converts to Islam'.

I acknowledge that:

I have read the participant information sheet and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the participate in an interview which will be audio-recorded.

I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

I understand that the findings of the study may be used in future related projects for which ethical approval will be sought, in a way that does not reveal my identity.

I understand that the information from this project is intended to be used for establishing a database/data collection/register for future use by the researcher, for which ethical approval will be sought.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s now or in the future.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Return Address:

This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is: H10137

APPENDIX D

Interview Schedule

It is important to note that as the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, the below is simply a rough guide and do not necessarily reflect the content of each and every interview. Additionally, the below prompts are not always phrased as questions within the schedule, which was done so as to facilitate a natural questioning style and discourage rote progress through the interview. However, some sample questions and topic areas are provided to indicate the types of questions that were asked.

A.   Introduction

       Introduction to researcher.
       Summary of project.
       Reviewing information sheet and signing of consent form.

B.   General

       Tell me a little bit about yourself – how old are you, what do you do during the week, who do you live with?

C.   Contact with Islam

       First memory of Islam or Muslims.
       Most common perceptions or understandings of Islam amongst the people they knew.
       Own perception of Islam as they were growing up.
       The mediums through which they learnt about Islam – e.g. books (specific names?), movies, news, etc.
       Did you know any Muslims while you were growing up?

D.   Personal History

       Where did you grow up?
       Could the area that they you grew up in be called multicultural?
       What was your family situation growing up – living with parents, grandparents, single parent household, siblings.

What the religious environment was like for them in their household.
Whether they had any religious education during
childhood/adolescence; if so, what religion.
Their relationship with religion throughout their
childhood/adolescence; did they reject it; were they interested in it; how
did they practice it if they did?
Family history – ancestry, when they came to Australia.
What traditions, customs and events did their family practice, they
associate with their culture.
Did they associate with a culturally diverse range of people?

E.   Conversion

When did you start to develop a serious interest in Islam?
What inspired you to look into it in more depth?
Concerns about Islam/becoming Muslim during research.
-          relating to how family/friends/others would react.
–   relating to possible clash between religion and culture.
–   relating to impact on social life or lifestyle.

How long ago did conversion take place?
Whether they made it known to friends + family straight away/before
conversion/significantly after conversion.
Did you find that there was adequate information and resources
available for new converts?
Biggest challenges following conversion.

F.   Interactions with non-Muslims

Reactions from non-Muslims after finding out about conversion.
Were there any changes in how people treated you or talked to you?
Any changes that you feel had an impact on your relationship with
people already in your life, either positively or negatively?
What do you believe are some common perceptions of Muslim converts
(even if these were not directed to you personally).

G.   Interactions with Muslims

Contact with Muslims following conversion.
–   Did you seek Muslims out?
–   Where did you search for Muslims?

If this was your first significant contact with Muslims, what was your
perception of the community?
How did you find that the Muslim community or individuals within it
responded to you?
Some common perceptions of converts encountered within the Muslim
community.

Common expectations of converts.
Do you associate or socialise with other white converts?
Do you get asked about your conversion story much?
What do you think Muslims want to hear when they ask you about your story?

H. Whiteness

To be a part of this project you had to self-identify as white. What does being white mean to you? What characteristics make you identify as white?
Did you ever question or wonder if white people could become Muslim, before you became Muslim?
Did you ever feel your racial identity was being challenged or under threat, pre or post conversion?
Did you ever feel that whiteness and Islam are incompatible, or that others believed they are?
Do you ever feel that being white makes Muslims respond to you differently than they do non-white Muslim converts?

I. Racism and Discrimination

Can you recount any incidents of racism or discrimination, before you became Muslim?
Can you recount any incidents of racism or discrimination, after you became Muslim?
Common circumstances during these incidents.
How the experience made them feel about their racial or religious identity.
Do you think Australia has a problem with Islamophobia?

J. Concluding and Miscellaneous

How would you describe the religious identity of Australia?
What role does religion play in Australia today?
What kind of support is needed for converts after conversion – immediately, short-term, long-term.
What does Australian Islam mean to you?

APPENDIX E

Coding Framework

1. **Background of participant to be tagged using descriptors (not coded)**
   a. Gender
      a.i. Female
      a.ii. Male
   b. Level of education completed
      b.i. Did not complete year 12
      b.ii. Year 12
      b.iii. TAFE or University
   c. Number of years since conversion
      c.i. Less than 3 years
      c.ii. 3-10 years
      c.iii. 11+ years
   d. Ancestry
      d.i. Anglo-Saxon
      d.ii. Anglo-Celtic
      d.iii. Southern European
      d.iv. Western European
      d.v. Northern European
      d.vi. Eastern European
      d.vii. Other
   e. Residential location in Sydney

2. **Personal History**
   a. Faith or lack of before converting to Islam
   b. Relationship with religion throughout life
   c. Cultural practices and traditions
   d. Religious education

3. **Contact with and conversion to Islam**
   a. Earliest memories of Islam
      a.i. Media except news media e.g. books, films.
      a.ii. News media
      a.iii. Friends, partners or neighbours
      a.iv. Educational institution
   b. Perception of Islam prior to conversion
   c. Catalyst for learning about Islam
   d. Process of learning
   e. Concerns about Islam during process of learning

  e.i. Reactions from family

  e.ii. Reactions from friends

  e.iii. Change in social life/lifestyle

  e.iv. Too hard to practise Islam

4. **Response from non-Muslims when hearing of conversion**
   a. Have not told family and friends
   b. Positive
   c. Neutral
   d. Negative
      d.i. Due to change in religion generally
      d.ii. Antipathy towards religion generally
      d.iii. Islam as associated with terrorism
      d.iv. Islam and women's rights
      d.v. Islam as too rigid
      d.vi. Islam as too visible/public
      d.vii. Islam associated with particular ethnic groups or class
      d.viii. Islam as foreign or unfamiliar
   e. Experiences of racism and discrimination

5. **Changes in relationships with non-Muslim family/friends**
   a. No significant change
   b. Relationships ended after conversion
   c. Social interactions with family/friends changed
      c.i. Alcohol
      c.ii. Food
      c.iii. Beach
      c.iv. *Ḥijāb*/clothing
      c.v. Cultural/religious events

6. **Challenges after conversion**
   a. Isolation
   b. Problems with Muslim community
   c. Lifestyle change
   d. Family and friends
   e. Religious educational
   f. Work
   g. Sense of belonging and identity were impacted

7. **Perception of white converts encountered from the general public**
   a. Radical/extremist
   b. 'Race traitor'
   c. Crazy

8. **Response from Muslims when hearing of conversion**

a. Surprise

b. MāshāʾAllāh brother/sister!

c. You are better than us.

d. Do you know how to pray?

e. Skepticism

f. Neutral

g. Why did you convert?

h. Seen as flaky/liberal/not a real Muslim

9. **Expectations of converts from other Muslims**
    a. Clothes
    b. Marriage
    c. Name
    d. Arabic language
    e. Food

10. **Participants' adoption of cultural attributes**
    a. Resistance to adoption
    b. Clothes
    c. Changed name
    d. Learnt another language
    e. Association with particular ethnic/cultural groups

11. **Being a white Muslim**
    a. Special treatment because they are white, compared to non-white converts
    b. Feeling like other Muslims feel validated by their conversion because they are white
    c. Being asked about their ethnicity
    d. Feeling that white and Muslim are seen as mutually exclusive.
    e. Feel that they lack culture compared to other Muslims (as a negative)
    f. Feel that they have less cultural baggage than other Muslims, are acultural (as a positive)
    g. Feel that other Muslims see them as frauds.
    h. Their feelings about being seen as a convert

12. **Whiteness and Racial Identity**
    a. Cultural attributes of...
    b. Feeling guilty about...
    c. White privilege
        c.i.   Cognisant of white privilege
        c.ii. Rejects the concept of white privilege
        c.iii. Does not discuss white privilege
    d. Colonialism and/or racism
    e. Feelings about own whiteness:

e.i. I've never thought of myself as being white until now

e.ii. I don't like to use the term/call myself white

e.iii. I don't see race

e.iv. White is purely a skin tone

e.v. I have been aware of being white for some time (including pre-conversion)

e.vi. I started seeing myself as white after converting to Islam

e.vii. I feel like I am less white now after converting to Islam

e.viii. I feel like I am in an 'in between' space as far as whiteness goes

13. **Australian culture, identity and nationhood**
    a. Drinking culture
    b. Laid back
    c. Public expression of religion is frowned upon
    d. Geographical regions
    e. Racist
        e.i. Towards Muslims
        e.ii. Towards non-white groups including Indigenous people
    f. Tolerant

14. **Belonging and place**
    a. Feels like they do not fit within broader mainstream Australian society, or some elements within it
        a.i. Not being able to socialise in the way that is expected of them
        a.ii. Being told they are no longer 'white' or 'Australian'
        a.iii. Racism or discrimination
    b. Feels like they do not fit within the Muslim community, or some elements within it
        b.i. Muslim community as being ethnically divided
        b.ii. Isolation due to not having a Muslim family
        b.iii. A lack of spaces where they feel they belong

15. **Thoughts on an "Australian Islam"**
    a. Acultural
    b. Cultural attributes of...

16. **Perspectives on Islamophobia**
    a. Islamophobia is a problem globally
    b. Islamophobia is a problem in Australia
    c. The behaviour of Muslims is what causes Islamophobia