

**WHEN “WHITE DEVILS” JOIN THE *DEEN***  
*WHITE AMERICAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM*  
*AND THE EXPERIENCE OF NON-NORMATIVE WHITENESS*

Juliette Galonnier

**Résumé :**

Dans un monde où les catégorisations ethno-raciales et religieuses s'entrecroisent et souvent se confondent, cet article analyse les convertis "blancs" à l'Islam comme des figures atypiques du processus de racialisation du religieux. Les convertis musulmans blancs viennent perturber les catégories du sens commun qui associent l'Islam à une certaine appartenance ethno-raciale et la "blancheur" à une certaine appartenance religieuse. Par ailleurs, les convertis pénètrent dans un espace, la communauté musulmane, où leur blancheur n'est ni dominante ni normative. Pour toutes ces raisons, les convertis blancs à l'Islam peuvent être caractérisés comme des "blancs atypiques" qui jettent un éclairage nouveau sur les significations attachées à la peau blanche aux États-Unis. Cet article, qui mobilise ethnographie et entretiens biographiques, explore la façon dont ces individus se positionnent vis-à-vis de leur propre identité ethno-raciale. L'article révèle que les convertis blancs sont sujets à diverses assignations raciales, avec des effets ambivalents voire contradictoires. La dernière partie de l'article examine les stratégies que les convertis mobilisent pour désamorcer les tensions ethno-raciales liées à leur blancheur au sein de la communauté musulmane, un espace où leur présence ne va pas de soi et fait parfois l'objet de contestations. La diversité des répertoires interprétatifs et des registres de justification auxquels les convertis ont recours dressent un portrait de la blancheur aux États-Unis bien plus complexe que ce que la plupart des études laissent paraître.

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**Abstract:**

This paper focuses on white converts to Islam as anomalous individuals in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined. Because they disrupt classic understandings of whiteness and enter a setting, the Muslim community, where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant, I argue that white converts to Islam can be characterized as "non-normative whites." I show that, by virtue of their discordant racial and religious identities, white converts to Islam develop a form of reflexivity that sheds light on the underlying assumptions attached to white skin in America. Using ethnography and in-depth interviewing with 42 converts, I thus explore how non-normative whites relate to their own whiteness. I demonstrate that whites too are subjected to racial objectification, although in ambivalent and at times contradictory ways. The last part of the paper examines the daily strategies used by white converts to maneuver their whiteness and defuse racial tensions within the Muslim community. The wide range of interpretive repertoires they employ presents a picture of whiteness that is more complex than what most academic studies make it seem.

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## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on the racialized experiences of people of Anglo or European descent who convert to Islam and are often referred to as “white Muslims.” Using ethnography in a convert support group as well as in-depth interviewing with 42 Muslim converts in three Midwestern cities, this paper investigates how converts relate to their allegedly dissonant racial and religious identities in contexts where Islam has been racialized as “non-white.” To be sure, the number of white Americans who “join the *deen*” – the religion of Islam – is rather small. There is also very little data on their demographics, which does not facilitate research on the subject. A report on Muslim Americans by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2007, p. 14) recently stated that “getting accurate estimates of American-born converts may be the most difficult challenge of all.”<sup>1</sup> According to recent mosque surveys, white people make up only 22% of converts to Islam<sup>2</sup> (Bagby 2012, p. 13) and represent only 1.6% of all American Muslims (CAIR 2001). But it is not because of their numbers that white Muslims deserve our attention. Instead, I argue that they are an interesting sociological subject because of their anomalous, exceptional identity. As I demonstrate in this paper, white people’s conversion to Islam is perceived as aberrant since Islam and whiteness have been constructed as fundamentally antithetical. White American Muslims do not fit in common-sense expectations about who belongs to Islam and who does not. They do not fit either in classic understandings about what being white means. Because their very existence belies the connection between race and faith which is so often taken for granted, I consider white converts to be “breaching experiments.” First conceptualized by Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel 1967), breaching experiments are a research device that consists in deliberately violating social reality in order to shed light on the underlying norms and standards that constitute it. Because they disrupt typical understandings of Islam and whiteness, white converts render visible the social assumptions that constitute these understandings and perform, therefore, an interesting investigational role. The discursive strategies and interpretive repertoires they use to make sense of their discordant identity reveal a picture of whiteness that is more complex than what most academic studies make it seem. After a methodical analysis of my interview data, I identify three conflicting ways in which converts assess their new racial and religious situation: they first consider their social status to be aberrant and anomalous (5.); they also confess being racialized as Brown and

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<sup>1</sup> White Americans make up 1% of regular mosque participants (Bagby 2012). The Pew Muslim-American study considers that there are currently 1.4 million adult Muslims in the USA (Pew Research Center 2007: 9), which gives us an estimate of 14,000 white American Muslims. In 2001, however, the CAIR mosque survey had calculated that there were no more than 4,110 white converts in the USA (CAIR 2001). These numbers should therefore be taken with caution.

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to 64% who are African-American. Hispanics also make up 12% of converts. The remaining 2% are ethnically and racially classified as “Other.”

losing their whiteness (6.); finally, they acknowledge the fact of their own white racialness and recognize the extent of their white privilege (7.). Taken together, these three rhetoric figures present a portrait of non-normative whiteness that is highly contradictory, at the edge of whiteness and non-whiteness. It appears that converts’ racial status switches across situations: they are successively objectified as weird whites, non-whites or whites. In the last part of the paper (8.), I identify the strategies used by converts to make sense of these contradictory aspects and maneuver the constraining reality of race. I conclude by a reflection on non-normative whiteness.

## **2. White American Muslims: How do they fit into the racial order?**

### **2.1. Non-normative whiteness**

Offering a considerable breakthrough for the sociology of race and ethnicity, *whiteness studies* have prompted scholars to decenter their gaze and investigate racial inequality from the perspective of those who benefit from it. By looking at the social and historical construction of whiteness as a source of privilege in America (Roediger 1991, Harris 1993), this body of literature has established a couple of interesting facts about whiteness (for a summary, see Rasmussen et al. 2001, Kolchin 2002).

First, whiteness grants *dominance* and structural privilege to those who are able to claim it. Hence, it is crucial to be recognized as “white” in order to benefit from the “wages of whiteness” (DuBois 1935 [1965]), which include, in a racially stratified society such as America, better access to housing, credit, employment, healthcare, political representation, freedom of speech, police protection, etc.

Second, whiteness is characterized by its *invisibility*. Whiteness is often considered as a default identity, a norm against which “ethnic minorities” are defined as “other.” It is seldom interrogated as a racial category in its own right. Contrary to racial minorities, white people never have to face the fact of their own racialness. Whiteness is invisible and unmarked. It is taken for granted. It maintains itself by refusing to identify itself.

Third, white identity is perceived by the wider American public as *empty* and flavorless. It is said to lack cultural content, distinctiveness and authenticity. Hence, white people can only find a sense of self by appropriating others’ cultures (Hooks 1992) and

becoming “wannabes” (Wilkins 2008) or by digging into the past to reconnect with an alleged ethnic heritage (Irish, Italian, Polish, etc.) whose content remains for the most part superficial and incidental (Waters 1990, Gallagher 2003).

This representation of whiteness as dominant, invisible and empty is correct on many grounds. Yet, it also perpetuates an understanding of whiteness as a uniform, fixed and timeless essence, which fails to account for the diversity of the white experience. Alistair Bonnett (1996) criticizes the “practice of treating ‘whiteness’ as a static, ahistorical, aspatial ‘thing.’” Similarly, for John Hartigan (Hartigan 2001, p. 157), a too homogenous understanding of whiteness leaves us “unprepared to acknowledge the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences within white and nonwhite identities.”

Indeed, the claim that whiteness is dominant, for instance, does not fully account for the situation of lower-class and poor whites who – while certainly better off than their Black counterparts – entertain a complex relationship to their racial privilege. It also offers limited insight into the experiences of white people who belong to settings where whiteness is not locally dominant. It is likely that whiteness functions in a more ambiguous fashion for this type of individuals. The claim that whiteness is invisible and unmarked is also problematic. Rasmussen (Rasmussen et al. 2001, p.10) note that this claim rests upon two strong assumptions: “First, the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness as a concept is predicated on an unknowing and unseeing white racial subject. Second, it posits a clear distinction between a group of white insiders who cannot recognize themselves for who they ‘really are’ and nonwhite outsiders whose point of view affords them authentic insight. Neither of these presuppositions allows for the possibility that whites who are positioned differently in society may actually view or live whiteness quite differently.” Finally, the claim that whiteness is empty reproduces common-sense understanding of whiteness as a blank and malleable universal, onto which diverse cultural contents can be easily imprinted. It does not account for the fact that white racial identity is also endowed with specific meanings, contents and textures.

In light of these problems, I argue that focusing on “non-normative whites” can be of great value to our understanding of the complexity of whiteness. I define non-normative whites as a) whites who disrupt stereotypical expectations about whiteness; b) whites who belong to environments where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant.

The literature on poor whites or “white trash” is emblematic of what a focus on non-normative whites can teach us. In *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of*

*Whiteness*, Matt Wray (Wray 2006, p. 2) examines the cultural significance of stereotypes associated with poor rural whites. Because white skin is expected to entail wealth and domination, he states that “white trash names a people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order.” In *Working-Class White*, Monica McDermott (McDermott 2006, p. 40) investigates the situation of lower-class whites in Atlanta and Boston and asks: since “white is typically conceived in terms of economic and social advantage, (...) what then becomes of the white racial identity of those whites who are poor and working-class?” Sylvie Laurent in *Poor White Trash* (Laurent 2011, p. 8) writes in a similar vein that the persons designated as white trash “shamefully embody the inconceivable failure of a population that was racially meant to prosper<sup>3</sup>” [my translation]. By focusing on individuals who disrupt stereotypical pairings of race and class, these works render more explicit the socio-economic and cultural expectations associated with pale skin.

Investigating whiteness in settings where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant can also prove very fruitful. This is what John Hartigan’s study of whites in Detroit – a city which is 77 percent Black – demonstrates. Hartigan (Hartigan 1999, p. 16) shows that, in settings where whites are a minority, whiteness becomes visible and tangible. It becomes much easier, therefore, to grasp it and study it. The author suggests that a focus on the few whites who remain in the inner-city has a heuristic value. Despite their statistical insignificance, these whites, by virtue of their exceptional status, highlight how the meanings attached to whiteness can be reconfigured locally.

All in all, although these contributions offer a more thorough understanding of whiteness in different settings, they overwhelmingly focus on class. And while a few studies on the intersection between whiteness and gender can also be found (Frankenberg 1993, Kenny 2000), nothing has been written on religion. Building on this research, this article shifts the perspective of non-normative whiteness to the issue of religion, by focusing on the experience of white American converts to Islam. I argue that, just like poor whites, white converts to Islam disrupt common-sense understandings of whiteness (2.2). And just like white Detroiters, they evolve in a setting, the Muslim community, where whiteness is neither unmarked nor taken for granted (2.3).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My translation. The actual text in French is « la personnification honteuse des échecs impensables d’une population ‘racialement’ destinée à prospérer ».

<sup>4</sup> White converts have rarely been studied as such. Indeed, most of the literature focuses on the reasons that drive conversion to Islam (Maslim, and Bjorck 2009, Köse 1996, Van Nieuwkerk 2006, Lakhdar et al. 2007, McGinty 2006). Very little has been written on the consequences of conversion and how it might affect racial identity and whiteness in particular. A few recent articles can be found, but they focus mostly on Australia (Alam 2012, Woodlock 2010), the UK (Moosavi 2012, Franks 2000), Denmark (Jensen 2008) and Spain (Rogozen-Soltar 2012). In the United States, this literature is almost absent and the possibility of using conversion as a lens to examine the intricacies between whiteness and religion has seldom been explored.

## 2.2. White Muslims at the intersection of race and religion

While Islam is primarily a religious identity, it has become associated with race over the centuries, a process that scholars have called the “racialization of religion” (Bayoumi 2006, Selod, and Embrick 2013, Rana 2007, Modood 2005, Meer 2008, Meer 2010, Meer 2013). As put by Omi Winant (Winant 1994, p. 59), “the concept of racialization signifies the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship.” According to this understanding, the racialization of Islam refers to the process of assigning a racial meaning to the fact of being Muslim, associating it with a number of phenotypical and cultural characteristics that are deemed unchanging and hereditary. This phenomenon is not new. The formal origins of Islam’s racialization can be traced back to 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, where the category of race emerged via a troubled connection to religion (Soyer 2013, Harvey 2005, Frederickson 2002).<sup>5</sup> According to Rana (Rana 2011, p. 33-39), this is the time when “Muslim groups began to be defined via racial mixture and notions of blackness.”

While Islam’s racialization originated in the Old World, it also traveled through space and time to reach the United States (Matar 1999). As put by Rana (Rana 2007, p. 155), with the conquest of the New World and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, “the notion of an infidel Muslim as a menacing figure was transferred into the Americas as part of the reigning ‘common-sense.’” The conflation of race and faith regarding Islam was thus part of the early American mindset. Islam was racialized as a Brown, foreign, and non-American faith while whiteness was associated with Christianity and Americanness (Morrison 1993, Dyer 1997; Hage 2005). The legal debates that surrounded the naturalization of Muslim immigrants under the Naturalization Act (which lasted until 1952) are indicative of this. Since US citizenship was then limited to “free white persons,” naturalization courts had to rule on the whiteness of applicants. Court discussions revealed that, for applicants of Arab descent, Islam was often an obstacle to be granted white racial status while Christianity proved a valuable asset (for a careful examination of those legal discussions, see Bayoumi 2006, Tehranian 2000). Hence, in setting the boundaries of the American nation, religion and race were often closely intertwined and Islam and whiteness defined as antithetical. Following a long history of racialization, the categories Muslim/brown and Christian/white now work as

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<sup>5</sup> Importantly for us, conversion was at the heart of this process. In 1501, the Catholic monarchs issued an edict that compelled all Jews and Muslims residing on Spanish territory to convert to Christianity. Those who didn’t comply were killed or forced into exile. Those who did, however, remained under close scrutiny. Suspected of retaining their previous religious beliefs, the Moriscos as they were called, became a matter of concern for the Crown. The crucial element for us is that Inquisitors started identifying potential religious traitors by the color of their skin. The Moorish (North African) appearance of former Muslims, in particular, became a key hint to track religious heresy. Because Moriscos’ blood was deemed to be “impure,” the sincerity of their faith was put into question.

pairs in American public imagination. It should come to no surprise, therefore, that the conversion of white people to Islam resurfaces nowadays as a problematic oxymoron.

### **2.3. The ambiguous status of whiteness in the American Muslim community**

White converts to Islam also evolve in a setting, the Muslim community, where whiteness is not taken for granted. According to a recent Gallup report (Gallup and CoexistFoundation 2009, p.10), “Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group surveyed in the United States.” While it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate data on the ethnic and racial background of American Muslims, a limited but detailed survey on mosque participants (Bagby 2012, p. 13) found that 33% are South Asian, 27% are Arab, 24% are African-American, 9% are African, 2% are European (Bosnian, etc.), 1% are Latino and 1% are white American. No matter how reliable these figures are, they present a statistical portrait of the Muslim community as a setting in which whiteness is not numerically dominant. Mosques in particular appear as spaces where white Americans are a tiny minority. As a result, it is likely that whiteness is made more visible and easier to study in such settings.

Apart from these statistical considerations, Islam in America also entertains a complex relationship to whiteness as a structure of power and dominance. Two positions can be distinguished:

- *African-American Islam* has historically been very confrontational vis-à-vis white America. In 1913, the Moorish Science Temple established by Noble Drew Ali used Islam as a tool to promote Black pride (Gomez 2005, chp. 6, Curtis 2002, chp 3). In 1930, the Nation of Islam led by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad endorsed a version of Islam that was inextricably coupled with racial issues. The theology of the movement explained the atrocities Black people had to endure on US soil by the doctrine of “the white man as a devil.” Whites were portrayed as “blue-eyed devils” that had come to rule the world for the last 6,000 years. Elijah Muhammad invited his followers to strongly reject the white devil’s creed, Christianity, and embrace Islam as “the true religion of the Black man” (Gomez, 2005: chapter 7; Curtis, 2002: chapter 4; Allen, 1998). The Nation contributed to the image of indigenous Black Islam as a religion fiercely opposed to white supremacy and whiteness in general.

- By contrast, *immigrant Muslims’* relationship to whiteness has been much less confrontational. After 1965, the United States opened their doors to immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle-East. Those who were Muslim found their place in America (Bilici 2012, Grewal 2013, chp 3) and became the new source of religious authority for the community. It must be noted that these Muslim immigrants and their children are mostly middle and upper middle-class.<sup>6</sup> As a result, whiteness operates in an ambiguous fashion for them. Scholars have claimed that immigrant Muslims are characterized by a strong “will to join American whiteness,” which has alienated them from their African-American co-religionists (Jackson 2005, p. 79).<sup>7</sup> Tourage (Tourage 2012) has also demonstrated that immigrant Muslims fetishize whiteness to the point of placing white converts in positions of prominence and leadership, thereby reproducing the tropes of white supremacy.<sup>8</sup>

In the history of American Islam, therefore, white people have alternatively been characterized as “white devils” and “white fetishes.” Given American Muslims’ multifaceted positioning towards whiteness, the Muslim community can be comprehended as a setting where whiteness is neither invisible nor unmarked. In fact, its dominant character is more a matter of contention than it is taken for granted.

In sum, white converts to Islam can be considered as non-normative whites for two reasons: first, because their very existence disrupts the tacit rules of ethno-religious identification that construe whiteness as antithetical to Islam; second, because they enter a setting where whiteness is controversial. By embracing Islam, white Americans find themselves caught in a complex web of relationships. This paper demonstrates that studying whites in such a complicated racial situation can prove heuristic. Building on Harold Garfinkel’s story of Agnes, an intersexed person possessing both male and female physiological characteristics who, as a result, developed an acute understanding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Indicative of this is a recent report by the Pew Research Center entitled “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream” (Pew Research Center 2007). While in most Western countries, Muslims overwhelmingly belong to the lower sections of society, America on the contrary, “tended to attract far greater proportions of wealthy, ambitious and educated immigrant Muslims.” (Jackson 2005, p. 17)

<sup>7</sup> For a more nuanced analysis of the Black-immigrant Muslim debate, see Chan-Malik (Chan-Malik 2011).

<sup>8</sup> However, this aspiration to whiteness has been violently thwarted in the post 9/11 context, which has witnessed the state-sponsored consolidation of Muslims’ racialization and the increased police surveillance of Muslim citizens (Cainkar 2011, Bayoumi 2008, Peek 2011, Abraham et al. 2011, Rana 2011). Bonilla-Silva’s conceptualization (Bonilla-Silva 2004) of America as a tri-racial system comprised of “whites” at the top, “honorary whites” in the middle and “non-whites” at the bottom can be of some help to understand American Muslims’ ambivalent relationship to whiteness. Immigrant and second-generation Muslims fit into the category of honorary whites: they aspire to whiteness and feel entitled to it because of their highly valued class status, but keep facing racial discrimination in their daily lives. Readers further interested in the “racial triangulation” of Asian-Americans vis-à-vis whites and Blacks and their simultaneous complicity and resistance to whiteness might also refer to Selod & Embrick (Selod & Embrick 2013), Kim (Kim 1999) and Koshy (Koshy 2001).

underlying assumptions that rule “normal” sexual status (Garfinkel 1967, chp 5), I consider in a similar fashion that white converts to Islam offer a “*perspective by incongruity*” that renders observable what is usually taken for granted: having had to transition from one status (white) to another (non-normative white), they develop a form of reflexivity that can be helpful to social scientists who wish to explore the underlying assumptions of whiteness. More specifically, they reveal how “normal” whiteness is supposed to look like as far as beliefs and religious belonging are concerned.

### **3. Methods**

Between March 2013 and April 2014, I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews in three Midwestern cities. My interviewees were recruited through snow-ball sampling. My sample includes 19 women and 23 men. While my focus is on white individuals (n=21), I also interviewed Latinos (n= 4), African-Americans (n=9), Asians (n=3), Native Americans (n=1) and individuals of mixed descent (n=4), in order to see whether conversion experiences differ across racial backgrounds and identify the specificity of the white convert experience. I also interviewed people who converted a couple of months ago as well as individuals who have been Muslim for several decades. Finally, I sought interviewees from various communities, following different theological orientations (Sunni and Shi’a, liberals and conservatives, Sufis and Salafis). Interviews included questions about the trajectory towards Islam, integration into the Muslim community, new religious practices, potential conflicts with family and friends and experience of racialization. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and they were audio-recorded and then transcribed. My objective was to gather specific anecdotes about how converts navigate the intersection between religion and race. I focused more specifically on the rhetorical devices they use to make sense of their whiteness within the Muslim community. However, it might have been misleading to rely too much on this material alone. Indeed, research on conversion narratives (Beckford 1978, Billette 1976, Popp-Baier 2001, Yamane 2000) has shown that these accounts cannot be taken as objective reports of the conversion experience. Rather, informants tend to reconstruct their whole biography in the light of their recent conversion and try to fit their story into the narratives of their religious tradition in order to demonstrate the authenticity of their conversion. In order to control for these issues, I supplemented my interview data with ethnographic observations.

From January 2013 to April 2014, I followed the association *American Da’wah*.<sup>9</sup> This organization mostly caters to the needs of American converts who feel disoriented and express a need for guidance. Born Muslims wishing to recommit to their religion after a period of disengagement are also welcome. I introduced myself as a researcher studying the process of conversion, but also as a “seeker,” that is, someone willing to learn more about Islam. I progressively became a regular, well-known member of the group. I attended most of the events organized by the association (discussion groups, Qur’an classes, classes on the life of the Prophet and a “Being Muslim” class). The discussion groups, held monthly, covered a wide range of topics such as “how to tell your family about your conversion,” “how to practice Islam in the workplace” and “finding your place in the community.” They helped me to understand how converts collectively reflect on their new Muslim identity. I also looked at some of the threads of the association’s Facebook group (restricted to people who physically attend the events), which often provide a good follow-up on group discussions. I must emphasize that *American Da’wah* caters to a specific population of converts: those who don’t feel comfortable in conventional Muslim spaces (mosques) and expressed the need to have safe spaces for converts. It takes a certain sense of entitlement to criticize a newly embraced community. The people who attend these associations are therefore highly-educated individuals for the most part, who have a distinct religious project. This certainly introduces a bias in my research since these individuals are not representative of all converts. I minimized this bias by conducting interviews outside of the association, with Salafis and lower-class converts for instance.

Following a recent methodological trend in the sociology of religion (McRoberts 2004, Winchester 2008), I supplemented my ethnographic observations with a more participatory approach: I tried to follow some of the new practices converts have to incorporate in their lives, such as praying five times a day, attending collective Friday prayers in mosques or fasting during the month of Ramadan. According to Omar McRoberts, participation in religious rituals allows ethnographers to relate more easily to their informants’ religious experience and enables them to humbly appreciate the significance of these rituals. Although I did not fully engage in those practices (I did not become a convert myself), paying attention to the lifestyle changes they require helped me to develop more empathy for my informants and be more reflexive in my research.

Finally, I analyzed some of the literature produced by white converts themselves: novels (Knight 2009), autobiographical accounts (Asad 2005 [1954], Knight 2006, Keller

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<sup>9</sup> The name of the association has been changed in order to preserve the anonymity of its members.

2001, Knight 2011), academic books (Faruq Abd-Allah, 2006) and Islamic pamphlets (Faruq Abd-Allah, 2004). I watched countless videos of the lectures and public speeches delivered by prominent white Muslim converts such as Imam Suhaib Webb, Michael Muhammad Knight, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Dr. Umar Faruq-Abdullah, Yusuf Estes, Ibrahim Hooper, Yahya Rhodus, Ingrid Mattson etc. The Muslim blogosphere is also an important source of information. Intense debates have recently taken place across the Internet over issues of whiteness, white privilege and whether those are compatible with Islam. Having followed the blogs of several white Muslim converts (Umar Lee, Bin Gregory, Brooke Rollings, Lucky Fatima) for a couple of months, I supplemented my analysis with some of their insights and reflections. This allowed me to have a better idea of the controversies surrounding white converts as well as to extend my coverage on these issues, beyond the microcosm of my ethnography.

#### 4. Learning Faith and Facing Race

The people in my sample come from different religious backgrounds (agnostics, staunch atheists, Catholics, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, etc.). They ended up embracing Islam for a large variety of motives, which would be too long to enumerate. What stands out from most interviews, however, is that these people were drawn to Islam for spiritual reasons. Islam “just made sense” to them. It “clicked,” as they say. According to some, the strict monotheism of Islam offered a powerful alternative to the complexities of the Christian Trinity. Others saw Islam as the next logical step to Judaism and Christianity (the Qur’an emphasizes the continuity with these two traditions, by building on the Bible and recognizing Abraham, Moses and Jesus as Prophets). Some felt a special connection to God after performing Muslim rituals (the Muslim prayer, a succession of moves including bending and prostration, was perceived as a unique bodily experience that opened special doors to spiritual awakening). After going through dramatic life events, others seized Islam as their last chance of spiritual healing. Emphasizing direct connection to the divine without any intermediary, Islam was perceived as less constraining than most clergy-based religions. Finally, some followed their spouses and converted to Islam to ensure the religious homogeneity of their household.

In sum, my informants embraced Islam as a *faith*. In a country like the United States, where changing religious affiliations is relatively common,<sup>10</sup> most of my interviewees

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<sup>10</sup> In 2007, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 28% of American adults had left their childhood faith and changed religious affiliation. This mostly included people who had changed from Protestantism to Catholicism or from Judaism

interpreted their religious transformation as a mundane and insignificant event. Jenna,<sup>11</sup> a 35 year-old white woman who embraced Islam after meeting a Muslim man, describes how she felt when she converted:

Frankly I didn't think much about how significant that would be to everybody else but it wasn't that significant to me. It wasn't a huge leap for me. I was a practicing Catholic before. There are already rituals and rigidity to some of that [laughs] and it wasn't that big of a deal for me to convert to Islam. It was a big deal to everybody else. (...) I underestimated how much of an impact it would have on other people. (March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Jenna's family did not accept her conversion. To this day, her brother does not talk to her. She also lost her position in a prominent law company. Having decided to embrace Islam as a *faith*, Jenna underestimated its social construction as a *threatening race*. In the following lines, I discuss how racialized religion impacts the lives of white converts and demonstrate that Islam and whiteness operate jointly in an ambiguous fashion.

## 5. Becoming an anomalous white person

White converts to Islam are a case of racial and religious misfit that produces incredulity. In fact, having discordant identities was often a source of embarrassment for my respondents. During our interview, Lisa, a 22-year old white woman who converted in 2010, confessed her worries that her conversion to Islam might associate her with “hippie” whites who convert to “foreign” religions in their quest for a new identity. This embarrassment prevented her from breaking the news to her friends:

“For a while, I was like very sensitive. Like my friends at [the university], I didn't tell them. One day I just came wearing *hijab* and I didn't offer any explanation. For all I knew they had assumed that one of my parents was Muslim and I didn't, like, stopped that belief or, like, tell them that was wrong and I was, like, very embarrassed. Because I think for most converts, like white people, when you think of converts, or like some religious transformations, things like radical born-again Christian or like “oh that white Christian is trying to be a Buddhist monk and like wearing these robes.” You think of them as kind of weird, maybe having like a mid-

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to no religion. If change within religious traditions was included (for instance, from one Protestant denomination to another), the survey found that around 44% of Americans professed a religious affiliation different from the one in which they were raised (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008).

<sup>11</sup> To preserve the anonymity of my informants, all the names have been altered. But I did try to keep the sounding of the names. The politics of name-changing are complicated in the Muslim community: some converts prefer to keep their name, while others decide to get a Muslim name. I tried to respect these choices, by choosing Christian-sounding names for those who decided to keep their name and Muslim-sounding names for those who decided to change it.

life crisis or some hippie college students. So for me that was embarrassing. I didn’t want to be associated with that AT ALL.” (May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Lisa preferred letting her friends develop wrong assumptions about her (such as the idea that she came from a Muslim home) rather than confessing her conversion and running the risk of not appearing as genuine.<sup>12</sup> As a college student well-integrated into a stable group of peers, becoming weird and unadjusted was terrifying for Lisa. Similarly, Stephan a 25 year-old man, who became acquainted with Islam through his involvement in the Palestine movement, decided not to tell his activist friends that he was interested in the religion “because it would have been weird, like ‘why are you going to the *masjid* [mosque]? You are just some random white boy.<sup>13</sup>” White converts are thus conscious of their anomalous position and try to avoid stigmatization by lying through omission for instance.

Indeed, when they come “out of the closet” and announce their conversion, white Muslims are generally met with a great dose of incredulity. Many of my informants encountered countless instances where they were reminded of their anomalous identity. When Hasan, a 35 year-old man who grew up in an impoverished neighborhood and converted to Islam at age 17, went to his mother to inform her of his conversion, she incredulously looked at him: “what???? don’t you know you are white????!!<sup>14</sup>” thereby pointing at the ontological incompatibility between the two identities. Similarly, in a recent online debate over issues of whiteness, blogger Umar Lee, a working-class white Muslim who converted as a teenager, wrote that one cannot possibly be white and Muslim at the same time: “I believe that to be Muslim and to be a white American is not possible from a sociological standpoint” (Lee 2009a). As a result, converts don’t fit into the mental frames of most people – Muslims and non-Muslims – who associate Islam with certain ethno-racial features. During one discussion group at *American Da’wah*, John, who converted 10 years ago, explained how he came to be seen as a big “question mark:”

I remember being amazed when I first met a brown guy who was Christian. That dude was Indian and he was Christian. I didn’t know this could exist! And it’s just the same for me today. When people see me, I am a big question mark for them. They don’t know what to think. They don’t understand.” (Field notes, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

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<sup>12</sup> This echoes Amy Wilkins’ findings (Wilkins 2008, p. 151) on Puerto Rican wannabes who are often decried by their classmates for trying to embrace a new racial identity and being “white girls who don’t know who they are.”

<sup>13</sup> Interview on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>14</sup> Interview on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014

In this conversation, John acknowledges that he is anomalous, just like a Brown Christian looked anomalous to him when he first met one. He is aware that, as a white Muslim, his identity is illegible, unexpected and unclassifiable. In fact, since the conversion of Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916),<sup>15</sup> one of the first white Americans who embraced Islam, the “yankee Mohammedans” (Faruq Abd-Allah 2006, p. 235), generate much talking and amazement. Diplomat Muhammad Asad (1900-1992, born Leopold Weiss) who converted to Islam in 1926 writes in his autobiography that his decision “appeared very strange to most of [his] Western friends.” (Asad 2005 [1954], p. 2). The novelist Michael Muhammad Knight ( Knight 2006, p. 2), who is also a white convert to Islam, defines white Muslims as “cultural mutants.” By upsetting religious and racial expectations, white converts lose their status as “normal” individuals. They become discordant. Interestingly, the next section demonstrates that one of the ways in which this dissonance is resolved is a shift in white converts’ racial status.

## 6. Leaving the realm of whiteness and coming “under the Veil”

Blogger Umar Lee writes that the contradiction between Islam and whiteness is not sustainable, and that one identity needs to prevail upon the other. He explains: “I feel that becoming a Muslim, fully becoming a Muslim, violates your whiteness... I believe we stop being white” (Lee 2007). By converting to Islam, therefore, not only do white Americans become anomalous individuals, but they also lose their whiteness and become, in a way, Brown. In 1893, first white American convert to Islam Alexander Russell Webb was described in those terms by the New York Times:

“His skin is tanned and there is about him, especially in his movements, an Oriental air. (...) His face is almost dark enough for him to be mistaken for a light Hindu and he talks with a slight foreign accent. With a fez, he would easily pass for a Mohammedan.” (quoted in Faruq Abd-Allah 2006, p. 8)

Because of his religious affiliation, Webb’s racial pedigree and mastery of the English language were called into question. While his skin color was as light as that of any other white American, his spiritual connection to Islam provoked a shift in his perceived racial identity, which became tied to the Orient and the Indian subcontinent. As a white woman

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Webb was born near the Hudson river in the state of New York. He was an American writer and publisher. In 1887, he became the US ambassador to the Philippines and converted to Islam in 1888. He then became a champion of the Muslim cause in the United States, establishing several societies for the study and promotion of his religion. He represented Islam at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

wearing the *hijab*, Lisa described a similar experience to me when I asked her how she was perceived by the wider society:

I am definitely perceived as a woman of color. Which is sooo insane to go through. As a white person, I think very few white people ever had that experience. It is really strange because sometimes when I enter a discussion, people a little bit older, they convince themselves that I have an accent [laughs]. And they think they understand me! Seriously! Or... Explaining American things to me. (May 19th, 2013)

Just like Webb two centuries ago, Lisa’s visual association with Islam (through her headscarf) alters the way she sounds in people’s ears. She is believed to have a foreign accent. I personally witnessed Lisa being racialized as an Arab during an Islamic class. As he was pronouncing a complicated sentence in Arabic, the teacher, an African-American Muslim, turned towards her and said: “you must probably know this since you’re Arab.” Lisa exclaimed: “what? I am not Arab!” As the teacher looked surprised (“you are not Arab?”), she said: “No. Polish.” The class burst into laughter as the teacher apologized profusely. Lisa’s case highlights the precariousness of racial categorizations and how much they are tied to religious affiliation.<sup>16</sup> Hadn’t Lisa been ostensibly Muslim, her white racialness would never have been questioned. Instead, the teacher was persuaded that she was Arab. White Muslim blogger Bin Gregory, who wears a Muslim cap and a beard, has made a list of the various ethnic identities people assign to him: Middle Eastern, Turkish, Syrian, Lebanese, Iranian, Afghani, Pakistani, Bosnian, Chechen, Malaysian, Black (Gregory 2005). Converts usually react in a light-hearted manner to these racial assignments. However, some racializing experiences also proved very traumatic. Lisa recounts one instance where she felt otherized and dehumanized:

It is weird because people in [my hometown] don’t recognize me. I had like this one woman who was... it is called the “lunch lady” and that’s basically the adult who comes and watches the classrooms during the lunchtime while the teachers are in break. And I was like the favorite student of this one lunch lady. For years. And I saw her at a diner recently and she just glared at me. And I wanted to rip my head off, and say “do you know who I am?” So it is... I don’t know... It is just... They are so otherized that Muslims become like unhuman. (May 19th, 2013)

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<sup>16</sup> Latino converts are also an interesting case. Another “Brown” population, their religious crossing generally goes unnoticed. They are immediately identified as Arabs or South Asians, highlighting interesting facts about how racial profiling operates. Marta, a 30-year old Mexican Muslim, thus explains: Latino Muslims “are incognito because they don’t look Mexican. Most of the Mexicans that convert, especially if they wear hijab, they look Arab, or they look Pakistani or they look like anyone else. We blend in so well.” (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Similarly, during our interview, Victoria, who also wears the headscarf, painfully recalled an instance where she was called a “sand nigger” by someone walking down the street. Finally, Marta, a 30-year old Latina wearing *hijab*, remembered the reaction of fear that she once sparked off in a mall:

I remember walking around one time in a mall and there was this lady with her kids and the mall was almost empty, it was just in the middle of the working day or something like that. And... the kids were just you know rumbling around her and she was not paying attention to them, they were just running all over the place. And I saw her look... the first moment that she saw me, her reaction was grabbing her kids and pulling them to her side. And it was almost like an instinctive protective reaction from a mother. And I just... I felt so sad. (...) I never wished to have that reaction on others. (June 10th, 2013)

The testimonies of Lisa, Victoria and Martha demonstrate that the headscarf is a particularly efficient factor of racialization. It sends a powerful signal that is immediately interpreted by others as a proof of racial belonging. By embracing Islam and choosing to visually display their spiritual identity, converts discover a new world, the world of racial discrimination: people ignore them, call them racial slurs or ostensibly fear them. To use a metaphor of W.E.B Du Bois in his description of the Black experience (DuBois 1994 [1903]), converts come “under the Veil” and discover the other side of racial relations in the United States. White converts lose their white racial identity and “cross the borders of whiteness” (Franks 2000). As Lisa explains in her interview, non-Muslims often feel that she has “betrayed something in America.” As put by Monica, a 35 year-old convert of Irish and Mexican descent, “you lose your white card!”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Victoria confessed: “you hear a lot about white privilege. And you don’t realize how powerful that is until you are taken out of that category”<sup>18</sup>. Converts offer a near experimental case for students of racialization, since they experience the transition from the world of whiteness to the world of “the Other.” This transition is often painful, as they suddenly become aware of the pervasiveness of the race problem in American society, a problem that had so far remained invisible to them by virtue of their whiteness. By transgressing the social order, white converts are removed from the very category of whiteness.<sup>19</sup> While my research provides evidence that Islam pushes white

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<sup>17</sup> Interview on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014

<sup>18</sup> Interview on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>19</sup> This echoes John Hartigan’s observations on the way hillbillies – poor rural whites from the Appalachia – were perceived by native white Detroiters when they migrated to the city: because they shared many characteristics (speech manners and diet in particular) with southern Blacks, they “destabilized the fixity of racial stereotypes” and became “objects of contempt for transgressing a racial order.” More importantly, they were cast outside the realm of whiteness as “hillbilly” became a term of racial boundary maintenance for native white Detroiters who sought to preserve the impermeability of the color line (Hartigan 1999a, p.28). Similarly, for breaking the religious expectations associated with whiteness, white converts are racialized as non-white.

converts outside the realm of whiteness, my interview data also shows that whiteness is not so easily erased and that it continues to operate as a sticky sign in daily interactions.

## 7. Facing whiteness: the Ineluctable Heaviness of Race

By joining Islam, white converts suddenly find themselves in communities which are overwhelmingly of color, and in which they are an actual minority. As a result, their whiteness, usually unmarked and unnoticed, is suddenly made visible to them. Abdullah, a 40 year-old man who converted 20 years ago and has a prominent status in the Muslim community, is very aware that other people in the mosque “don’t look like him,” an issue he never really faced in his previous life as a white American. He says: “I have never been in a [Muslim] gathering where most of the people come from similar backgrounds than me.” Similarly, Lisa explains that, while in the wider society, she is perceived as a woman of color, “in the community, I feel so insanely white. It is weird.” Among their fellow Muslims, converts became hyper aware of their whiteness, something they didn’t really have to do before embracing Islam. Their reflections on the subject highlight a couple of interesting facts about white skin and the cultural meanings associated to it.

### 7.1. White Skin, Islamic Masks: on not being recognized as a Muslim

White converts to Islam try hard to pass as “Islamic” but encounter the irreducible reality of race: because of their whiteness, no one identifies them as Muslim. One evening at *American Da’wah*, recalling the difficulties of her integration into the Muslim community, Jenna, who does not wear any Muslim marker (such as the headscarf), complained that “as a white person, I constantly have to remind Muslims that I am Muslim.<sup>20</sup>” Similarly, Julia, a 20-year old white woman who converted a year ago and hasn’t put on the *hijab* yet, also expressed her frustration that her own coreligionists don’t identify her as a Muslim:

Every time I see another Muslim, because I still have my fresh convert mindset, I am like “oh I am Muslim! They are my people!” And I get very excited. And then I realize that too them I just look like an everyday non-Muslim white person. (...) I am always thinking: this person is probably seeing me right now as a white non-Muslim. And I can’t blame her for that. Because I look like any other white non-Muslim around here. There is no way for them to just look at me and think “oh, she

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<sup>20</sup> Fieldnotes, January 12<sup>th</sup>

could even possibly be Muslim.” And I am like “man, if I wear hijab, it would be, you know, unquestionable.” (June 26th, 2013)

Julia envisages becoming a *hijabi* to stop looking like “any other white person” and indicate her Muslimness to others. Since her skin color is no longer consistent with the religious presentation of self she wishes to convey, she wants to resort to other, more efficient, identity markers. This strategy to “pass as Muslim” by wearing the *hijab* usually works well. The headscarf is a powerful Islamic marker and a recognizable signal for almost everyone, both Muslims and non-Muslims. But it is not always the case. Martha, a Mexican-American convert, explains that when she first put on the headscarf to go to her office – something she describes as the most frightening experience of her life – her coworkers didn’t make the connection with Islam at all.

One day I decided to put [the hijab] on to go to work. (...) And it was so scary. It was like I was going through a battle. I mean I was going to face a lion or something. It was like the most scary thing that I did. And when I showed up to work, nothing happened. All of those fears, all of the made-up scenarios that I had rehearsed in my head, nothing happened! I was so relieved and frustrated at the same time! Because nobody acknowledged it. Nobody was telling me anything. I was like “come on, you guys! I have something on my head!!!! You are not even saying anything! Are you serious? I get that you are not throwing me or bashing me but at least say something, come on! I am not invisible!” (...) And the first person to tell me anything... – I was in the bathroom, I remember – one of the ladies that was there just washing her hands next to me, she was like “oh!!! Did you just graduate from something?” And I got these weird questions on whether it was a holiday, whether I had just graduated or became a higher level of whatever.” (June 10th, 2013)

The sheer possibility that Martha could have become Muslim was so out of the picture for her co-workers that they didn’t recognize the Islamic signal she was trying to send. Similarly, Olga a 22-year old white woman of Polish descent, very blond, explains that, when she occasionally wears a headscarf, people on the street don’t always identify her as a Muslim and probably think: “oh she is probably just cold or coming from the rain!” Olga acknowledges that she is still identified as white and that her being Muslim does not equate to a loss of her whiteness. Similarly, on his blog, white convert Bin Gregory disconfirms the assumption that white Muslims are racialized as “Other” because of their newly embraced religious beliefs. On the contrary, he emphatically says that they remain absolutely and totally white:

“O my fellow white Muslims! If you think we all automatically stop being white by virtue of practicing Islam, you are gravely mistaken. Your family may disown you, your friends might stop speaking to you, but to the white man on the street, you are still white. Now, you can be ashamed of that, you can be proud of that, you can protest against that, but that is how things are in America in 2007. (...) If you get funny looks, it’s because you look funny with that hat on your head, not because they think you’re not a white male.” (Gregory 2007)

In fact, while white women can more or less successfully pass as Muslim by putting on the headscarf, white men encounter many more difficulties at displaying a “Muslim look” and asserting their Islamic authenticity. Even when they wear the recognizable signs of Islam (such as the beard, the *thaub*, a long Muslim dress, or the *kufi*, a small Muslim hat), they are commonly mistaken for members of other religions, such as Judaism or the Amish sect. Jonathan, who has been Muslim for several decades and displays a very long and impressive beard, thus recounts an episode during which fellow Muslims mistook him for a Jew:

It’s ironic, being Caucasian and having a beard, nobody even thinks I am Muslim. Even other Muslims don’t think I am Muslim. I have had experiences going to the zoo, with my family, where... like... Muslims from other countries are present. They saw me and they were speaking in Arabic saying “I tell you, this guy is a Jew. Look!” Because I have a beard and I am white. (February 25th, 2014).

Similarly, Abdullah, who used to be a children’s attorney, recalled that, even though he made conscious efforts to look Muslim, wearing a long beard, a *thaub* and a *kufi* almost every day, his young clients never guessed that he could even remotely be connected to Islam:

Sometimes I assume people know more about Islam than they actually do. Because I am so into Islam and post 9/11 you figure like Islam is the thing...So sometimes I assume that everyone who sees me knows that I am Muslim, but, talking to these kids, I realized they didn’t all know that “oh this means you are Muslim.” They were like “what are you? Are you Jewish? Are you some kind of Amish?” (October 23rd, 2013)

Even when they try hard to visibly display their Muslim identity, white converts are still racially objectified as white. In spite of the clear Islamic signals they try to send, their white skin stands out. Thus, chromatic markers (skin color) seem to eclipse religious markers and symbols (*hijab*, beard, etc.) in the racial and religious identification of some converts.

## **7.2. Being read as white: positive and negative ideas about white Westerners**

The following lines focus on the cultural and moral assumptions that stem from converts’ durable association with whiteness. My interview data shows that within the Muslim community, the meanings associated with white skin are multiple and vary across contexts and situations.

White skin is first and foremost endowed with a positive meaning. Thus, white Muslims are often over-congratulated for their conversion and put on a pedestal within the community. More than any other converts, they are valorized as a blessing, a sign that Islam is truly universal. Jonathan explains that:

If somebody becomes Muslim, and he is Caucasian, they [Muslims] will have him give a lecture about Islam tomorrow. Because they want to say “look! Look! One of these guys is one of us now!” (February 25th, 2014)

White Muslim bloggers often comment on the fact that they are “trophy converts” (Smith 2009, Kompier 2013, Fatima 2009). In an interview study with converts, Yazbeck-Haddad (Yazbeck-Haddad 2006, p. 40) found that “African American converts expressed their feeling that immigrant Muslims tend to seek ‘Anglo’ converts to Islam and regard them as more important.” As noted by white female blogger Safiya: “aren’t white Muslims the prized pets, the conversion stories everyone wants to hear, the ones who get far more marriage proposals and attention?” (Outlines 2009). In her interview, Lisa explained that this feeling can be pleasant sometimes: “you do get treated like a mini-celebrity in the first few months... like you take advantage of it.”<sup>21</sup> However, on the *American Da’wah* Facebook group, white converts also confessed being deeply disturbed by their instrumentalization in the Muslim community. Among the recurring topics, was the issue of the public *shahada* (ceremony of conversion), which was often embarrassing for converts who were “thrust onto a huge stage with a spotlight” and felt like “items of display” for the community.<sup>22</sup> Another white female blogger denounced the tokenism of white Muslims who are being used as “public faces” by the community. She writes that “white converts are sometimes given positions of responsibility in a tokenistic way, in order to provide a group with a more ‘North American’ image” (SobersSecondLook 2012). Indeed, white Muslims are valued assets for a community that is being stigmatized at the national level.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>22</sup> Facebook group, December 2011



Sheikh Hamza Yusuf



Dr Umar Faruq-Abdallah



Imam Suhaib Webb

In his article analyzing the ascension of some prominent white male converts (such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Dr Umar Faruq Abdallah and Imam Suhaib Webb) as renowned Islamic scholars, Mahdi Tourage (Tourage 2012, p. 217) explains that the “American white convert imams and sheikhs are not idealized for their successful performances and conversion narratives alone, they are also idealized for their whiteness.” Brian, a 22 year-old white convert who is also an anti-racist activist, is very sarcastic about this phenomenon:

Whether Muslims like to acknowledge it or not, there is a certain amount of prestige that is identified and coupled with whiteness. And you see it. Especially in scholarship. Like Hamza Yusuf is revered as like a demi-god, with Dr Umar Faruq Abdullah. It’s like “give them a f... break!” (...) Eminem says that “my skin tone may have actually allowed me to become as famous as I did.” Because he became a spectacle. He became something that could be exploited alternatively. (...) And I think, I think, you can say the same for Hamza Yusuf. (...) Everyone loves him. Everyone loves his white ass! (February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

The white converts in my sample who have attained positions of prominence within the Muslim community express their embarrassment that their achievement might have had something to do with their white skin. Thus, Olga, who is director of communications in a famous Muslim organization, says:

The fact that I got this position, it does make me think a lot. (...) The director even joked with me, you know, saying “it’s more impressive if we have a white Polish girl talking about Islamophobia than a Brown hijabi girl. Because when a hijabi girl talks about Islamophobia, all it sounds like is ‘of course you would say that because you are a Muslim’ (...) whereas when you have a nice white blond girl from Poland talking about it, people are like ‘oh really, she has a point!’ I feel like that is kind of the sad truth. (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014).

Similarly, Abdullah, who recently obtained a position as a Muslim chaplain in a prominent university, has had to reflect on the reasons why he was selected:

I have to think. The fact that Muslims accept me as a chaplain, and the fact that some Muslims look up to me and these young Muslims they ask me stuff and stuff, is it somehow... is it... Am I part of that in my own small scale? Not like a famous person like Hamza Yusuf but in my own small scale, are people privileging me or making me seem more important because I am a white convert? That makes me feel very uncomfortable, obviously. So, I would want to run away from that! It is hard to know what to do. (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

Olga and Abdullah feel that they benefitted from white privilege in the sense that their whiteness might have opened professional doors for them in the Muslim community. Thus, it appears that white skin remains associated with positive contents and is at times almost fetishized.

However, it is not always the case. In some instances, whiteness is also associated with evilness and immorality (Alam 2012). In his study of converts in Manchester, Moosavi (Moosavi 2012) documents the difficulties faced by converts in their attempts to pass as authentic Muslims. He reveals that Westerners are sometimes distrusted by immigrant Muslims because of their perceived immorality. Having been born to native American families, converts are sometimes perceived as fundamentally corrupted. They are seen as ontologically linked to the decadence of “the West,” against which Islamic values of morality and purity are being defined and understood. Although this lack of acceptance and recognition is faced by converts from all ethnic and racial backgrounds, it is particularly acute for white American converts, whose white skin durably associates them with the history of domination, colonization and exploitation that is deeply entrenched in the memories of Muslims, be they immigrants from the ex-colonial world or African-Americans. Jonathan, who spent a lot of time among first-generation Arab immigrants when he converted, had to face such a history:

The immigrants who come here, they have on their minds: “those are the conquerors. The whites are the ones who spread all the evil throughout the world.” So they don’t think of them as potential Muslims. They think of them as like “the Other”, the enemy (February 25th, 2014).

In the post 9/11 context, white Muslims are also associated with police surveillance and state oppression. Converts are often suspected of being FBI agents. Jonathan, thus explains:

Think of a white person that’s going to a mosque. If it’s an immigrant mosque, like of Arabs or Indians and Pakistanis or Africans, in the back of their minds, they are thinking “he might be with the FBI.” And the same thing actually will happen if you go to an African-American mosque. (...) They will also look and think of somebody as like “he is with the police,” or “he is with FBI,” or “he is here to investigate us,” “he is one of those people.” That’s the worst.<sup>23</sup> (February 25th, 2014)

Being associated with white racial dominance is often processed with shame and guilt by white Muslims. At least, this is the case for Lisa who talked a lot about this issue during our interview:

“I feel ashamed [in the Muslim community]. I guess when you look at all the white guilt I mean, you don’t... Nobody wants to be a member of a community that has caused so much physical, emotional, economic, every pain possible. You don’t want to be associated with it. (May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

For Lisa, being associated with whiteness is painful because it is seen as an oppressive racial identity, one that has for several centuries sought to dominate people of color, who make the bulk of her Muslim friends today. When hearing the stories of discrimination that her nonwhite friends experience almost every day, she explained that, as a white person she feels “kind of responsible for what is happening.” Lisa explains that she carries her white skin with embarrassment within the Muslim community because she knows that it is often interpreted as a sign of racism and intolerance.

### **7.3. Sexual assumptions about whiteness: the wedding process**

Racial assumptions about white Westerners are also strongly tied to gender. Male and female converts are not perceived in a similar manner, indicating that whiteness is endowed with different meanings across sexes. The wedding process is particularly revealing of the gendered character of white women’s racialization. Getting married in Islam can be complicated since dating is generally not allowed. Wedding candidates usually rely on their families or mosque leaders to find a suitable wedding partner or register on Islamic wedding websites to chat online with potential spouses. While the process is generally smooth for Muslim men, it is very hectic and at times disastrous for Muslim women.<sup>24</sup> This is

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<sup>23</sup> On the issue of FBI agents pretending to be converts and infiltrating mosques, see the radio episode “The Convert” *This American Life*, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/471/the-convert>

<sup>24</sup> Hena Zuberi, “The Muslim Marriage Crisis,” *Muslim Matters*, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://muslimmatters.org/2013/09/27/muslim-marriage-crisis/>

particularly the case for female converts who embraced Islam on their own (i.e. not for a particular man) and lack the family and community resources to find a spouse.<sup>25</sup> They often find themselves exposed to racial and sexual objectifications. Public outcry recently erupted in the Muslim community of one of the cities I study when a Muslim man posted on the bulletin board of a mosque an index card with the following ad: “Looking for a wife. Looking for a white wife. I am not looking for any Asian, African or Arab. Must be under 23.” The man received countless phone calls from fellow Muslims saying that his ad was profoundly racist and that this type of requests was inappropriate in Islam. The mosque also received many emails from people in the community who didn’t understand why the board had agreed to publish such an ad in its bulletin. Given the outrage, the ad was eventually removed. This episode revealed that white women are perceived in particular ways. Jonathan, who witnessed several conversion ceremonies throughout his life as a Muslim, told me: “Honestly, if a Caucasian sister becomes Muslim in a *masjid* and the *masjid* has a fairly good population, I might be exaggerating, but she might get several proposals that night!” White female bodies are considered to be highly sexualized, a representation that positions them as romantically attractive. Olga, who recently started going online to find a husband, was able to decipher some of the sexual contents attached to her white skin:

I am like talking to this [South Asian] guy potentially for marriage (...) He was saying, “you know (...) I prefer to date white women.” And I am like “why???” He said “well, you know, a lot of South Asian Muslims don’t appreciate things that I appreciate like tattoos and music and all this other stuff that white women tend to appreciate.” And I am like “oh yeeaah, because all of us white women we are so like crazy and rebellious, we are like woohooowoo, we all love all that stuff!!!!” (laughs). (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014)

Olga wholeheartedly laughed at the man who dared making such comments. Victoria, however, who grew up in a strict Protestant household and never dated anyone throughout her whole life, felt deeply hurt by some of the sexual assumptions that were made about her when she started looking for a Muslim husband:

When it comes to the matrimonial thing, really men assume the worst of white women who convert! They assume that we are in for anything. It’s like “are you kidding me?” (...) It gets very uncomfortable. Why would you just assume this of me because of my ethnic background? (...) I think there is an assumption that

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Sondos Kholoki-Kahf, “A Few Good Men? The Muslim American Woman’s Dilemma,” <http://goatmilkblog.com/2008/06/10/a-few-good-men-the-muslim-american-womans-dilemma/>

<sup>25</sup> “Four Convert Marriage Fails (and how to avoid them),” March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 <http://muslimmatters.org/2014/03/03/four-convert-marriage-fails-and-how-to-avoid-them/>

because we are like white American females, we must have led a certain type of life, so we are unsuitable for someone. (December 6th, 2013)

While looking for a Muslim husband, white women are exposed to a new form of racial objectification.<sup>26</sup> Previously unmarked, their whiteness becomes salient and appears to be associated with a set of traits and characteristics which are not really in tune with how they represent themselves. These mostly conservative white women, quite prudish by American standards, are suddenly portrayed as very sexual, loose and immoral, a shift that is hurtful and forces them to think about their own whiteness.

At the end of this section, it appears that white converts can’t escape the fact of their own racialness. Despite their efforts to look Muslim and behave Islamically, they continue to be read as white, a racial identity which is associated with multiple and divergent meanings. I now turn to the strategies used by white Muslims to counteract this racial objectification.

## **8. Maneuvering whiteness: ordinary lives and de-racialization strategies**

In this section, I study the “rhetorical and strategic tools” (Lamont, and Mizrachi 2012, p. 366) that white converts deploy to reduce the dissonance between their racial and religious identities. I focus on the discursive devices used by them to negotiate the negative meanings associated with white skin and lighten the heaviness of race, which constrains their attempts at becoming authentic Muslims. I find that, depending on their background (particularly socio-economic), converts resort to various logics and grammars of justification (Boltanski, and Thévenot 1991) to defuse racial tensions. The methodical analysis of my interview data enabled me to identify three main orders of justification that govern their discursive strategies. The first one (8.1), which I call “theological,” is an intellectual project that relies on doctrinal and historical arguments to demonstrate the compatibility between whiteness and Islam. The second strategy (8.2) is “politico-moral”: white converts present themselves as “good” whites as opposed to “bad” racist whites and craft strategies to repudiate their white privilege. The third register is “identity-oriented”: white converts emphasize alternative aspects of their identity in order to minimize their connection to white

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<sup>26</sup> Let’s note here that it is even worse for African-American female converts who often experience overt racism during the marriage process. See Ihssan Tahrir “Black + Muslim + Woman,” September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013 <http://loveinshallah.com/2013/09/25/black-muslim-woman/>  
For a detailed study of how race impacts the wedding process in American Muslim communities, see Grewal (2009).

Americanness and develop a form of strategic binding with fellow Muslims. This can be done by stressing ethnic (8.3) or class (8.4) belonging.

### **8.1. “Islam is color-blind:” making room for whiteness**

The most common interpretive frame used by converts to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their religious and racial identities is to emphasize the universalistic appeal of Islam, a proselytizing religion that defined itself as having a privileged mission towards humanity. For instance, Stephan, a 23 year-old white convert, clearly differentiates certain religious traditions “that are very tight to a specific place and a specific time and that it does not make sense for white people to try to appropriate” (such as Jainism, Sikhism and Native American traditions) and major Abrahamic faiths, which by virtue of their universalizing mission, “make room for him” and “allow his participation.” By emphasizing the universal message of Islam as a faith, American converts try to counteract the processes of racialization and ethnicization that have progressively associated it with certain races and cultures.

Converts often dig into Islamic history to demonstrate that, in all the ages, Islam successfully merged with local customs to create forms of religious and cultural syncretism. Jonathan thus explains that the Berbers, Africans and Asians who converted to Islam never became Arabs. While the Islamic message remained the same, it was tinted with local cultural expressions.

Morocco, Tunisia and all that, those people are practicing Islam, according to the way the religion is, but with their culture. And the same thing with Nigeria and Indonesia, Turkey and all these things. Their culture plays a pivotal role in their Islam. So I think, it would just be you know a matter of years, before you end up having a whole community that is predominantly Caucasian. (February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

This is held as the proof that a cultural American (or “Caucasian”) Islam can also emerge, allowing Americans to embrace the faith without being accused of cultural inadequacy.<sup>27</sup> Most converts at my field site don’t see any contradiction in being both white American and Muslim. They seek to isolate Islamic teachings from Muslim-majority countries’ cultural practices and blend those “pure” teachings with American local practices. The

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<sup>27</sup> This strategy has already been highlighted by Anthony (2000) in his study of Nigerian Igbos who convert to Islam, a religion that is mostly practiced by the Hausa tribe. He showed that Igbo Muslims resist the process of “Hausanization” and hold on to their Igbo identity after becoming Muslim. “Rather than conflate being a Muslim with being Hausa, they emphasize the universality of Islam.” By doing so, they “actively challenge the view, so widely embraced in Nigeria that Igbo and Muslim identities are mutually exclusive.”

organization *American Da’wah* is emblematic of such an effort. During group discussions, Arabic words are almost forbidden: the coordinator of the discussions, Pr. Ali, systematically interrupts those who use words such as *hijab* (veil), *deen* (religion), *iman* (faith) or *dunya* (world) and asks them to offer an English translation instead.<sup>28</sup> One of the main proponents of the creation of an American Islam is Dr. Umar Faruq Abdallah who often gives classes at *American Da’wah*. Dr Faruq Abdallah is a white convert who embraced Islam in 1970 and is now an influential Islamic scholar in the United States. In his quest for an American version of Islam, he has written a biography of Alexander Russell Webb, who, as mentioned above, was one of the first white Americans to embrace Islam. Talking about Webb as an example that should inspire American Muslims today, he wrote: “Webb unapologetically espoused his newly adopted faith in terms that made clear he saw no contradiction between it and his deeply rooted American identity” (Faruq Abd-Allah 2006, p. 4). Similarly, in his own call to develop an indigenous American Islam, Dr Faruq Abdallah (Faruq Abd-Allah 2004) tries to de-link Islam from Arabic and South Asian cultures and challenge common assumptions that Islam has to be Brown and foreign. White converts thus resist the racialization of Islam by re-emphasizing that Islam is a *faith* adaptable to different cultural contexts.

## 8.2. “Not your average white person:” repudiating whiteness

*“Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to and even eaten with people who, in America, would have been considered “white” but the “white” attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam.”* Malcolm X, *Letter from Mecca*, April 1964

Throughout my research, I noticed an interesting phenomenon: white converts often strongly dislike other white converts. Thus, Stephan explains that he feels uncomfortable when other white converts try to be friends with him, on the mere basis of their shared whiteness. He equates this to a form of cowardice:

White converts often flock to me. Which I notice. Because white people are cowards in general and they want comfort and feeling like “oh! There is another white person! Let’s talk!”.(June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Similarly, Abdullah confesses that he has always been suspicious of other white converts:

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<sup>28</sup> Fieldnotes, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013

“I am somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of being American, being a white American. It is not something I embrace. So I have mixed ideas when I feel people are looking at me as “the white convert” type person. I feel a little... I feel weird about that. And I feel that that’s something that does not fit me. And I don’t like the fact that I am like other white converts. So, for a long time I think I had some, almost like a suspiciousness of other white converts and stuff like that.” (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

In these two excerpts, Stephan and Abdullah try to differentiate themselves from other white converts by emphasizing that they are not like “them.” Indeed, white converts have become suspicious for a wide array of reasons. Recent debates across the Muslim blogosphere tend to suggest that white Muslims are reproducing “white supremacy” within the Muslim community and try to “reform” Islam in a white American way. The attempts by white Muslims to create an “American Islam” are depicted by some authors as a neo-colonialist project, which reifies immigrant practices as impure, deviant and backward (Fatima 2009, Br00ke 2009). A white male British blogger refers to this behavior as “whititude—an amalgam of ‘white attitude’ that describes the attitude that [white converts] have a certain enlightenment that is lacking in the established Muslim community” (Smith, 2009). The fact that white converts might be imposing their own Orientalist perceptions on Muslim communities on the ground that are more “rational” and “progressive” has thus become a matter of concern and debate. The champion of this critique is probably Michael Muhammad Knight, a white convert who is known for his involvement in the “punk Islam” movement and for his numerous novels on American Islam. Knight has been particularly critical of American white Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, whom he sees as using his white privilege to present his interpretation of Islam as “free of cultural blemish, and universal in its appeal” (Knight, 2013a). Knight argues that these interpretations are not universal at all but carries the cultural mark of white America. Contrary to Dr. Faruq Abdallah (see above), Knight does not seek to reclaim the legacy of Alexander Russell Webb but strongly criticizes him. According to Knight, Alexander Russell Webb

“treated his new religious affiliation like other white men of his time treated entire nations: he marched in and immediately claimed to own it. (...) Webb argued that South Asian Muslims, whom he sometimes called “niggers” in his journals, were so caught up in “ignorance and superstition” that they understood Islam no better than cows or horses. (...) Over a hundred years later, it’s still a problem. (...) When a white guy wears the hats of brown guys and talks about “reviving the Islamic spirit,” it might be time to run fast” (Knight 2013b)

According to Knight, white American converts’ intentions to reform Islam are condescending and dangerous, reproducing the patterns of white imperialist projects. In a similar vein, white convert Umar Lee fustigates on his blog the “white liberals” who converted to Islam with a view of reforming the religion: “there seems to be a breed of white liberals and leftists who accepted Islam after 9-11 and immediately after taking *shahada* were already trying to reform the religion. (...) Sorry, but this to me smacks of a form of cultural imperialism by white westerners” (Lee 2009b).

These are serious accusations. Progressive and anti-racist white converts such as Stephan and Abdullah, who often reflect on issues of white privilege and white supremacy, try to distance themselves from these allegations. One of the ways they do so is by overtly repudiating their whiteness. Trying “not to be white,” however, is an impossible task, as Abdullah explains:

My response [to white privilege] was kind of like to run away from being white and try not to be white. And I know that’s kind of a myth or that is part of white privilege too, the fact that you can try to run away from it and do what you want (laughs).  
(October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

Given the impossibility for white converts to escape their white racialness, they try to disclaim their whiteness by constantly emphasizing that they are “good whites,” as opposed to “bad white supremacists.” In their daily lives, white converts strive to prove that they are not like the “average white person” (Wilkins 2008, p. 203). They often reinterpret their whole biography in light of this effort. John, the main coordinator of *American Da’wah*, explained during a discussion group how he always refused to embrace the codes of the white suburb in which he grew up:

When I was a young child, my Mom wanted me to pick up the white suburban culture. But from my childhood, my three best friends were Black, Latino and Indian. So from the beginning, she knew I was not going to behave as she wished.  
(Field notes, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

According to John, his mother knew from the beginning that her kid would not behave the “white way.” The fact that he subsequently embraced Islam confirmed her fears. Abdullah also described how, as a teenager, he was “wearing X hats,” “identifying himself with Africa” and “took an African name for himself.” As a high school student, he also became a member of the local NAACP (he was the youngest and only white person there) and was deeply involved in the anti-racist movement. Following the legacy of Malcolm X, he decided to embrace Islam as part of his anti-racist commitment. Some white converts portray

themselves as “race traitors.” Stephan for instance proposes to transcend his whiteness. Building on the work of James Baldwin, he uses Islam as a means to rise above its inherited status as a white person and gain access to his true self as a human being:

James Baldwin has this thing, that’s not even a real theory of his, that’s just something I picked up on from reading him. He talks a lot about inheritance and birth rights. These are two different words he uses. And he talks a lot about inheritance in this world, being something that you have no choice over and something you have to acknowledge or else you are doomed. (...) If you don’t acknowledge that you are white, that you are part of this thing, you are doomed. But then there is your birth right. Your birth right is that excess of humanity, whatever that means. (...) I mean there is the basic political discourse which is like “yes, in this world, the effect and the consequence of my body is to be white.” But there is also the internal desire to be more than that. (June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

In their book *Race Traitor*, Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (Ignatiev, and Garvey 1996, p. 115) write that “when whites reject their racial identity, they take a big step towards becoming human.” This is what Stephan sees himself as doing by embracing Islam. Stephan desires to be more than just white and refuses to be locked up in what he sees as a constraining racial order. Later on in the interview, he proposes a strategy to escape inherited racial frames. Quoting a recent article entitled “Toward A Maroon Society” published by jazz musician Fred Ho,<sup>29</sup> Stephan envisions the creation of Maroon colonies in the manner of these African slaves in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who escaped slavery to form their own independent settlements (Price 1979). By converting to Islam, he explains that whites can become “Maroon whites” and be “heretical in their practice of whiteness.” Stephan’s thoughts demonstrate the inventiveness and creativity that white converts to Islam can display in their attempts at transcending whiteness. Taking seriously the thought of Malcolm X, they consciously use Islam as a means to challenge common-sense understanding about whiteness and create a subversive identity that disrupts classic racial assignments.

### **8.3. Ethnicity is the solution: excavating Islam-friendly ethnic identities**

Another strategy used by white converts is to emphasize their ethnic belonging, considered as positive and enabling (Waters 1990) at the expense of their white American identity, perceived as empty and negative. Olga, who is very proud of her Polish identity (she

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<sup>29</sup> Fred Ho, “Toward a Maroon Society,” *New Clear Vision*, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013 <http://www.newclearvision.com/2013/06/12/toward-a-maroon-society/>

moved to the United States as a young child) explains that her immigrant background allows her to not be associated with white American supremacy and its negative aspects. She says: “the thing is because I am Polish, and because I am an immigrant, even though I look American and sound American, a lot of my Muslim friends do tell me that I get a sort of a pass at times when they are shit-talking white people.” Olga escapes the moral stigmatization attached to an all-powerful whiteness because of her visible ethnic background. Olga’s Polish ethnicity also adds flavor to her practice of Islam. She says: “Islam does not erase my Polish or Slavic identity, it just adds to it, makes it more exciting.” Interestingly, Olga’s ethnic and religious identities are co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing: they both entail a specific language, culture and values that distinguish her from mainstream white America. Similarly, Abdullah explains that it is difficult to practice Islam in a void: faith needs to be tied to a strong culture in order to thrive. He recalls being very appreciative of Palestinians and African-Americans who, without being nationalistic, were very proud of their culture which “informed their background and who they were.” Abdullah decided that in order to be more productive in his own spiritual practice, he also needed to reconnect with his original Irish culture.

I said if I want to be authentic to my own history, and my own background, I should really identify with something. And because I wouldn’t do the American thing (laughs), I said I will do the Irish. I will go back to my Irish ancestry and claim it and be like the Irish Muslim, which fitted well with... at least my understanding of being Irish fitted very well with like this kind of rebel mentality of trying to kind of oppose oppression and stuff.” (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

Contrary to his white American identity, Abdullah sees his Irish background as an opportunity to connect his ancestry to Islamic ideals and principles. By digging into the Irish past and excavating its history of oppression, he is able to reduce the dissonance between his ethnic and religious identities. Moreover, symbolic ethnicity (Waters 1990) allows him to practice Islam more “authentically” by remaining true to his origins.



*‘Muslim shamrock’ posted by Abdullah on his Facebook page to showcase his dual Muslim and Irish identities.*

One must note, however, that the Irish American and Polish American identities that Abdullah and Olga are trying to claim are mostly imagined and personal. They are not tied to an actual community. Abdullah confesses that he actually feels uncomfortable among other Irish people:

If I really want to be real about being an Irish Muslim then I should spend time reaching out to Irish people who don’t know anything about Islam or who don’t like Muslim people and I should try to connect with them. And I have tried to do that but I kind of ran into the fact that they don’t really share the Irish identity that I share. (...) I never felt more out of place in my life than when I walk into an Irish bar. (...) There is no place where I get stranger looks, there is no place where I feel more like I shouldn’t be here. (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

Similarly, Olga has rather tense interactions with other Polish Americans.

For me it’s really hard because the majority of the Polish community in [this city], I would say 90% are extremely Islamophobic, very racist, very conservative. I have very few Polish friends. (...) I just can’t stand being around a lot of them. They just make terrible jokes, just like, very... I don’t know. They are all very conservative for the most part. So my Polish identity is mostly like myself! (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014)

The ethnic projects of white converts are thus audacious but limited. They enable them to make sense of their personal history at the individual level by deemphasizing their burdensome white racial identity and replacing it by a more positive and islamically consistent ethnic identity. But this endeavor is not immediately recognizable and appreciated

by others. The other “identity-oriented” strategy that white converts use might be more effective: it emphasizes class status over racial belonging.

#### **8.4. Class solidarity and Muslim brothers in misery**

There are two types of white converts in the United States, which can roughly be differentiated according to their socio-economic status and the period during which they embraced Islam:

- Those who converted in the early 1990s tended to come from marginalized sections of society. At that time, Islam was underground, subversive and tied to African-American culture. It entailed a strong rejection of mainstream white America. The Spike Lee movie *Malcolm X* that came out in 1992 triggered massive conversions among whites who were immersed in hip-hop and Black culture. Those who converted were living in impoverished neighborhoods for the most part. They embraced Islam as a strict disciplinary system that would enable them to reorient their lives. They became part of tight-knit Muslim communities run by scholars from abroad (mostly Saudi Arabia) or African-American Salafis, particularly on the East Coast (Lee 2014, Elmasry 2010).
- Those who converted in the post 9/11 context come from a much different background. After 9/11, Islam could not really afford to be radical any more. Prominent Islamic figures had to tame their discourse. They crafted an image of American Islam that was much more friendly, open-minded, wishful of integration and respectful of mainstream American values (education, family, success). Under such circumstances, the people who became attracted to Islam were sociologically very different from those who embraced the faith in the 1990s. They were mostly college students who became acquainted to Islam through Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) on large universities campuses; or professionals, especially doctors, lawyers and engineers who discovered Islam through their colleagues of Arab or South Asian descent.

Pre-9/11 lower-class white converts emphasize their shared socio-economic status with poor African-American Muslims, thereby minimizing the significance of their white racial status. By highlighting elective affinities with other lower-class Muslims, lower-class white converts are thus able to bridge the racial gap that separates them. Hasan, a 35 year-old

man who grew up in a lower-class family living in an impoverished Black neighborhood, explains that he always had good relationships with African-Americans, particularly after he embraced Salafism in 1997. He stresses the fact that they share a common indigenous street culture:

I hung out with Black people most of my life... you know. (...) On the East Coast, [the Muslim community] is mostly Black. But I never experienced any problem from any brother (...) and we accepted each other because we are indigenous Americans, you know. We come from the same culture, from the hip-hop culture, from skate-boarding, you know, from that background, street culture as they say. (...) Now a different white guy, you might ask the question, he comes from a different background than me. I hung out in the projects, you know, I hung out in bad areas, so it's like, I didn't really have that white-guy paranoia of new people, you know. (February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

The accusation of being “a paranoid white person” is transferred to post 9/11 upper class white converts, who are depicted as shallow college-educated white liberals who embraced a domesticated, whitewashed version of Islam. Hasan emphasizes its commonality of experience with “ghetto” Muslims. He likes to reminisce his days as a young Salafi, when Islam was an extremely demanding religion, and expresses his skepticism concerning the religious sincerity of the “new converts” who never had to endure anything:

We were people that came from the streets. We came from gang backgrounds. You know people came from doing drugs or whatever, you know, bad backgrounds. And this new group now are people that are college-educated and they are... some of them are rich kids as we would say. And, so they didn't have to struggle like we did. They never slept on the ground. Outside in the cold. I have! You know. They haven't lost a lot. And so sometimes people like this are very sensitive. We were more masculine ... At that time, you know, I would give everything up for Islam. Now, we have to sugar-coat things because people get their feelings hurt. Everybody is very sensitive now. As opposed to in those days. (February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

Hasan is rather critical of organizations such as *American Da'wah* who tend to “sugar-coat” things and promote a progressive, step-by-step conversion to Islam. Hasan says that people there are fed with “baby food” while he had to eat “steak.” Similarly, Abdullah, who appreciates the overall work of *American Da'wah*, confesses that he does not feel particularly at ease in their space. Coming from a background of anti-racist activism and being very close

to the African-American Muslim community, he feels that *American Da’wah* is too “elite” for him:

The overall vibe and most of the people tend towards that certain demographics which is kind of the immigrant or elite or like educated. (...) Sometimes you feel like you don’t fit in because you are not beautiful like that [laughs]. Even me, I don’t dress like so fashionably and I don’t know what’s the fancy tea I am supposed to drink and stuff. I feel like it’s not really my crowd. (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013)

Similarly, white blogger Umar Lee jokingly imagines what a white *masjid* (mosque) would look like. Amalgamating whiteness with white upper-class hipster culture, he portrays this imaginary mosque as such:

The Imam has a degree from Al-Azhar and an English Literature Degree from a Liberal Arts college and you can still see the hole in his ear from where the ring was. In his *kutbah* [sermon] he often references things such as butterflies, rainbows and waterfalls and kind of sounds like Garrison Keeler.

Carpooling to the *masjid* will be encouraged and there will be bike paths leading to the *masjid*.

Low-fat and low-calorie Ramadan *iftar* dinners will be served.

Fundraisers will include bake sales, craft shows, and canoe trips.

The *masjid* will have sports teams for the youth but they will all be non-contact and low-risk sports and helmets and padding will be required for bike riding on *masjid* premises.

There will be a Muslim therapist on staff.” (Lee 2006)

Both Abdullah and Umar Lee focus on cultural practices (dressing fashionably, drinking fancy tea, carpooling, eating organic food) to draw distinctions between themselves and upper-class white converts. On a more serious note, Umar Lee criticizes recent converts and organizations such as *American Da’wah* for not addressing the race issue and failing to bridge the gap that separates them from African-American Muslims. On a recent Facebook post, he thus wrote: “there is a post-911 influx of liberal converts from affluent backgrounds. Often with liberal-arts degrees. Many times considering themselves activists. Strongest on the West Coast. They have a particular disdain for working-class whites and masculine expression. They find a natural home with suburban mosques and progressive Muslim groups surrounded by Desis [South Asian] from wealthy backgrounds.” Interestingly, therefore, the clash lower-class/upper-class white converts tends to follow the contours of the African-American/immigrant Islam debate (Jackson 2005). Depending on their socio-economic background, white converts tend to side either with African-American indigenous

Islam in the inner city or elite immigrant Islam in the suburbs. Lower-class white converts proudly recall their struggles and put the stress on their street-savviness to identify with their African-American brothers and reject whiteness into the realm of upper-class elite suburban culture. This process of white dis-identification through class solidarity appears quite effective.

## **9. Conclusion**

Racialization is about setting boundaries. Conversion is about crossing them. The difference between these two concepts is generally clear-cut. In this paper, however, I have sought to elucidate the complicated processes that stem from conversion to a racialized religion. I have demonstrated that racial ascription and spiritual choice intersect in multiple ways, generating inconsistencies and incongruities. White converts to Islam tell a story of individuals who try – more or less successfully – to challenge racial predestination in regard to religion. They are a case of racial/religious misfit whose analysis can be extended to all individuals converting to racialized religions. I have shown in this paper that, in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined, those who make the choice of the latter against the former expose themselves to a welter of challenges and contradictions.

White Americans’ racial status is reconfigured in contrasted ways upon their conversion: their identity first becomes discordant and abnormal. By choosing Islam, they experience a shift from “normal whiteness” to “non-normative whiteness.” White Muslims are anomalous, unconceivable creatures. They disrupt the mental racial frames of most people – both Muslims and non-Muslims. I demonstrated that the cognitive dissonance generated by white converts to Islam is resolved in two ways. In the first case, white converts take on the racial attributes of their coreligionists and become racialized as Brown. Because they disrupt religious expectations about whiteness, they are simply cast outside the realm of whiteness so that the religious-racial order can be restored. Their spiritual choice alters their racial status. In the second case, white Muslims continue to be read as white, which jeopardizes their attempts to be recognized as authentic Muslims. Their white skin associates them with a series of characteristics that are deemed un-Islamic or threatening for Muslims: privilege, dominance, racism, supremacy, sexual depravation. Their racial status prevents them from operationalizing their spiritual choice and making it real to others. In the last part of this paper, I analyzed how white converts respond to these various racial objectifications. I showed that they try to reduce the dissonance between their own racial and religious

identities in ways that enable them to assert the “authenticity” of their spiritual experience. In trying to minimize racial conflicts within the Muslim community, converts from different socio-economic, ideological and ethnic backgrounds resort to various rhetorical tools:

- The first strategy (theological) aims at *making room for whiteness* within Islam by demonstrating that Islam is for all peoples at all times. It is mostly implemented by white converts who feel comfortable with their white American identity and want to focus on their spiritual path.
- The second strategy (politico-moral) on the contrary intends to *repudiate whiteness* through Islam. By embracing this non-normative religion, white Americans consciously rebut classic understandings of whiteness to create a new image of themselves. This political project is mostly carried out by highly-educated whites who are involved in the anti-racist movement and approach whiteness and white privilege from a philosophical perspective.
- The third strategy (identity-oriented) aims at *minimizing whiteness* by putting the stress on alternative identities that are believed to be more compatible with Islam. It is a practical counterpart to the second strategy. It intends to bridge the gap with fellow Muslims by emphasizing either a common socio-economic status or an ethnic background of oppression.

These three strategies are a testament to the inventiveness that people deploy in their daily lives to escape racial objectifications. This paper therefore represents an important contribution to the study of racialized religion because it explores the ways in which converts simultaneously live faith and face race, in contexts where these two categories have become conflated.

I suggested in the introduction that white people’s conversion to Islam is best comprehended as a case of non-normative whiteness. I would like to return to the specific results yielded by this approach. Scholars have claimed that it has become extremely difficult to study whiteness in an era of color-blindness (Lewis 2004), where conversations around race are becoming extremely rare. Whiteness studies are thus facing a key methodological problem, which is the pervasive invisibility of their object. In this research, I made the assumption that one of the strategies to render whiteness visible and suitable for study was to focus on non-normative whites, that is whites who either disrupt commonsense understandings of whiteness or belong to local settings in which whiteness is neither dominant nor unmarked. I demonstrated that white converts to Islam fulfill these two criteria and that, by virtue of their anomalous status, they are compelled to develop a form of

reflexivity that is seldom found among other white individuals. By challenging hegemonic understandings of whiteness, converts bring whiteness into the spotlight. A tiny minority within the Muslim community and an oddity for the larger American society, white Muslims have had countless occasions to reflect on their whiteness. Studying white converts enables us to “name whiteness,” to “see it at work” (Frankenberg 1993). In this research, I decided to simply listen to what converts had to say about their whiteness, even if this implied dealing with contradictions and inconsistencies.

The picture of whiteness that emerged from this research is very complex. I showed that whites too are subjected to racialization, but that their responses to racial objectification vary across backgrounds, contexts and situations. Obviously, some individuals are more reflexive than others. In studying racial consciousness among whites, Ruth Frankenberg (Frankenberg 2001, p. 77) once noted that she was “struck by the extraordinary ease with which individuals can slide from awareness of whiteness to the lack thereof and, related to that slippage, from race consciousness to unconsciousness and from antiracism to racism.” This “now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t” articulation of whiteness can also be found among white converts to Islam, who react differently to their newly discovered racial status. Some inadvertently reproduce the tropes of white dominance in their practice of Islam: the project to create an “American Islam” can be seen as representative of such a bias since it blatantly ignores the fact that an indigenous Islam already exists among African-Americans and dismisses immigrant Islam as unworthy and unsuitable to the American context. Yet, other white converts are particularly aware of these issues and try to come to grips with white supremacy and racial inequality. They disclaim or minimize their own whiteness in order to prove their credentials as authentic Muslims. Some of them even embraced Islam as part of their anti-racist commitment and as a conscious strategy to rebut white privilege.

This variety of responses indicates that whites are not a homogeneous group. By analyzing white people’s diverse positioning vis-à-vis their dominant racial identity, my study thus performs a “de-reification of whiteness,” without downplaying the continuing significance of white privilege in the United States. The key challenge for white converts is to assert themselves as “good Muslims” or “good whites,” despite the color of their skin that connects them to a history of antagonism with the Muslim world. This appears to be a common challenge for all white Americans who portray themselves as progressive or are involved as “white allies” in the anti-racist movement (Case 2012, Hardiman 1982, Bonnett 1996, Hughey 2012). The conclusions of this research can thus be applied to all whites who intend to develop alternative white identities or belong to settings where whiteness is not taken for

granted. Studies which focus on whites in a minority position are more and more necessary since whites are progressively losing their demographic dominance in America. It thus appears important to study how white privilege is reconfigured in spaces where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant.

To conclude, this paper has paved the way for a more thorough understanding of the relationships between “Islam and the white American.” In that regard, it can be read as a counterpart to Sherman Jackson’s book *Islam and the Blackamerican* (Jackson 2005) which studies the encounter between Islam and African-Americans. Paying acute attention to the social, historical and racial context of this encounter, Jackson analyzes the challenges faced by Black Muslims in reconciling the specificity of their American experience with the super tradition of historical Islam. I intended to provide a similar analysis for white Americans. My objective was to emphasize the absence of symmetry between the two experiences: while African-Americans embraced Islam as a result of racial oppression, white Americans do so from a position of racial dominance. Analyzing the sociological implications of this asymmetry appears crucial as the number of white converts is quickly growing, thereby reshaping the face of Islam in America and shifting the relations of power within the Muslim community.

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