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# **Muslim clothing and Swedish whiteness**

## **Becoming Muslim and the mobility of white converts to Islam**

Nina Jakku

### **Abstract**

This article discusses social positions of Swedish female converts to Islam who have previously passed as white majority Swedes, but whose experiences have changed, sometimes radically, since donning the hijab. It addresses their accounts of being treated and evaluated differently by teachers, co-workers, family and friends, and having their choices questioned by strangers. It also examines the double standards that white converts to Islam must negotiate when dealing with daily life in Sweden, and how becoming a Muslim leads to frequent exclusion from constructed whiteness and Swedishness and the privileges attached to those positions.

**Keywords:** Whiteness, Muslim, Islam, Religion, Mobility, Secularity

### **Introduction**

The exclusivity of Swedish whiteness has a long history. Through its intersections with other axes of difference such as religion, gender and class, whiteness functions as a system of privilege based on racist exclusionary practices, both in contemporary and historical terms. This study examines how inclusion in, and exclusion from, the category of Swedish whiteness is performed from the point of view of female converts to Islam, meanwhile considering the consequences of exclusion and the ways in which whiteness intersects with other markers of racialisation. This study thus adds to the growing number of studies that address the intersectional positioning of white converted women in Europe (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Jensen, 2008; Özyürek, 2010; Vroon, 2014), while also providing an alternative perspective to research that takes whiteness as a point of departure (Franks, 2000; Gallonier, 2015; Moosavi, 2015) in the context of UK, France and the USA. Racialisation operates differently in different European countries and in the USA (Goldberg, 2006), something which needs to be explored further.

Hanna Bäckström, who has been conducting interviews with converts to Islam for her master thesis,<sup>1</sup> recalls one of the interviewees telling her that she had been asked the question: 'Were you Swedish before you became Muslim?' (Bäckström, 2013). This reflects an idea of the improbability, or even impossibility, of a person being both Muslim and Swedish.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Lena Sawyer (2000) notes in her dissertation<sup>3</sup> *Black and Swedish* how racialised constructions of Swedishness are preventing Afro-Swedish youth from being included in the category 'Swedish.' Yet, as we can see from the quote above, blue eyes and blond hair do not in every case qualify an individual for the discursive qualities of white Swedishness. Discussing the many dimensions of the construction of Swedishness, Johan Cato (2012, p. 48) claims that it is often a matter of comparison in which religion tends to play a crucial part, alongside culture, values and appearance. Some of the interviewees claim that, since starting to wear the hijab, they often get the question, 'Where do you come from?'. This is sometimes followed by, 'But where do you come from originally?', together with suggestions of Lebanese or Bosnian origins. These questions imply a perceived distancing of the questioned person from Swedishness and whiteness (Arbouz, 2012, p. 40).

In this article I will address the questions: How does conversion and donning the hijab of previous white-passing people affect their daily-life mobility? In which ways does their whiteness, which is understood differently than in their past, lead to almost daily negotiations? Analysing whiteness, Muslim beliefs, and social positions from the point of view of converts will illustrate the women's shift in positions, from white passing to re-racialised as non-white or not-quite-white (Moosavi, 2015, p. 52). Hijab-wearing women in Sweden are particularly vulnerable to discrimination (Gardell & Muftee, 2017, p. 633) and are often targets of hate crimes (Doubakil, 2018, p. 74), which urges research on the topics addressed here.

This article is based on qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with twelve female converts to Islam who were aged between 23 and 55 years at the time of research (September 2015 to June 2017).<sup>4</sup> Four had converted to Islam between 2005

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<sup>1</sup> Lund University, Department of Gender Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Similar reflections have been made regarding the categories White and Muslim in Britain (Moosavi, 2015, p. 45) and Muslim and European (Jensen, 2008, p. 389).

<sup>3</sup> Mittuniversitetet, Department of Social Work.

<sup>4</sup> All interviewees are anonymised. I recruited the interviewees through snowballing sampling and social media.

and 2007, four between 2009 and 2011 and four in 2012. I interviewed two women twice and the rest once; each interview lasted at least one hour, several up to two hours. All interviews were followed by discussions off-record, and in some cases by additional clarifying email correspondence.<sup>5</sup> This method was chosen for two reasons: on the one hand, it allowed me to remedy the recognised absence of Swedish female Muslim voices from Swedish public discussions and media (Axner, 2015); and on the other, to gain access to the interviewees' emic point of view on the racialisation of Islam through their daily-life experiences – a specific knowledge that is only accessible through qualitative methods (Fägerborg, 2011, p. 97). Naturally, the interviews cannot alone account for the complexity of the interviewees' experiences, nor the topic at hand. However, they do offer fruitful starting grounds to further explore their personal experiences and the meaning making-practices that frame and shape their and other people's understanding of themselves in relation to Swedish society. Furthermore, by building on previous research on the relation between religion and whiteness, and analysing Swedish media discourse on Islam, I have been able to access dimensions that are often taken for granted and therefore not spoken about in the interviews (Pripp & Öhlander, 2011, p. 114). In this article, I quote five of my respondents, whom I introduce in greater depth; however, all interviews have had an impact on my understanding of the topic.

The article starts with an overview of whiteness in the Swedish context, from both a historical and contemporary point of view. Thereafter it will focus on the role of religion within racism mainly from a historical perspective. Then it will describe and discuss how the positions of the interviewees have changed after the conversion and the donning of the hijab. The final part consists of a concluding discussion.

## Whiteness in the Swedish context

'A person is deemed visibly white because of a quite complicated interaction of elements, of which flesh tones within the pink to beige range are only one: the shape of nose, eyes and lips, the colour and set of hair, even body shape may all be mobilised to determine someone's "colour".' (Dyer, 1997, p. 42)

As Dyer's definition implies, the concept of whiteness is both complex and diffuse. Ruth Frankenberg (1993, p. 236) has also noted that whiteness changes depending on both

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<sup>5</sup> The interviews were all conducted in Swedish. Thus, all translations are mine.

time and space: a product of local, regional, national and international relations, both contemporary and historical. Thus, whiteness can neither be regarded as static nor assumed to be the same in different countries like the USA, Australia, France and Sweden – although similarities can naturally be found (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 29).

Some groups in Sweden, for instance Finns, who previously experienced being racialised as non-white, have increasingly been included in the constructed Swedishness and its accompanying whiteness on the basis of their phenotypical pale bodies.<sup>6</sup> Tobias Hübinette, Helena Hörnfeldt, Fataneh Farahani and René León Rosales (2012) claim that those immigrants and national minorities who are perceived as whites may, over time, become regarded as Swedes, while those perceived as non-whites risk remaining non-Swedes. This suggests that Swedishness is a construction closely interconnected with whiteness.

Whiteness consists of a complex set of practices and privileges in a similar way as heteronormativity and masculinity (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 28). These categories tend to be normative and understood as neutral positions, further similarities consist in the privileges often being unacknowledged by those who possess them (Ahmed, 2011). Gender, class and sexuality tends also to play a part in the construction of privileged whiteness which calls for intersectional analyses in the understanding of the complexity of whiteness. Indeed, to be counted as, or able to pass as, white, is not only a matter of hair-eye-skin colour, since the boundaries for whiteness are continuously changing (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 32).

The exclusivity of Swedish whiteness dates back to the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century when 'scientific' race-biology notions were born of the pens of scholars. In 1921 the Swedish parliament made the decision to establish the first race-biology department in the world at Uppsala University. During the decades that followed, national minorities and indigenous peoples – Tornedalers, Sami, Jews, Sweden Finns and Romani people – became the target of a series of racist policies that prevented them from speaking their own language and exposed them to pseudo-scientific endeavours such as skull measuring (Svanberg & Tydén, 1999). While the situation today is not comparable – certainly not in terms of scientific backing – Hübinette and co-authors argue that it is in light of those historical experiences that we may understand

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<sup>6</sup> Similar accounts from the USA can be found concerning Jews, Irish and Italians (Sullivan, 2006, p. 3).

the contemporary role of language in difference making. They add that there is a clear racialising dimension to the idea of who can be expected to speak fluent, 'correct' Swedish: bodies coded as white are often associated with fluency in the language, while non-white bodies are not (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 23). Several of the interviewees in this study have reported occasions when people either speak English to them or speak very slowly, using simple Swedish (c.f. Franks, 2000; Vroon, 2014). Hübinette and co-authors argue that similar everyday occurrences indicate that the ability to speak Swedish and, hence, Swedishness are connected to whiteness. Indeed, as my interviewees' narratives show, Swedish female converts are often subjected to exclusionary linguistic practices that frame them as non-fluent Swedish speakers, something none of them had experienced before starting to wear hijab.

While we cannot know the motivations of people asking questions like 'But where do you come from originally?', the impact of racialising structures is there regardless of intent (Habel, 2012, p. 46). When analysing these kinds of interactions, what matters is that they repeat themselves. 'It may not be that one specific person's questions are problematic; rather it is the fact that it has happened 20 times before' (interview with Hanna; c.f. Molina, 2010, p. 79; Arbouz, 2012, p. 40). The uncoordinated repetition of the same questions by unrelated people proves the pattern.

## Religion and racism

Even though the race-biology era has left deep scars, it represents only a short period in the history of racism. The intersection of race and religion can be tracked to at least the fifteenth century and the practice on the Iberian Peninsula of *limpieza de sangre*, which meant that a person had to prove a long genealogy of Christianity in order to claim purity of blood (Wasniowski, 2017, p. 29). And indeed, the racism targeting Swedish national minorities did not start with the establishment of ideas of biological race or resulting institutions. The respective histories of all the national minorities had long been paved with injustices and abuse, which were often connected to religion and, not infrequently, implemented by the Swedish church (Fur, 2016, p. 241). The hegemony of Christianity in Sweden goes back to the first half of the sixteenth century. Evangelical Lutheranism was declared the state religion in 1593 and beliefs deviating from it were forbidden (Gardell, 2010, p. 25). Mattias Gardell argues that the problem with Jews,

Catholics and other deviant believers, from the hegemonic point of view, was not that they did not believe in God, but that they did not practice the right doctrine.

In Sweden, Islam used to be considered heretical, and in some Christian circles it still is. However, today it is mainly read against the background of Swedish society's normative secularity (Gardell, 2010, p. 84; c.f. Fernando, 2014). According to David Thurfjell (2015), the normativity of secularity is connected to the idea or narrative about Sweden and its progress and modernity, which has a self-aggrandizing evolutionary function. Importantly, one of the narrative's components is the successive liberation from religion, now regarded as something that existed in our history but only lingers on among the 'others' in contemporary Sweden (Thurfjell, 2015, p. 111; c.f. Asad, 2009; Mahmood, 2009). In Europe in general Muslims have been made the outsider, a treachery first against Christianity and later against secularist leanings. David Theo Goldberg argues that Muslims have been perceived as contrasting to Europeans' urbanity, rationality and spirituality within nineteenth century racial historicism.<sup>7</sup> As this study testifies, however, dispositions dominate still today (Goldberg, 2006, pp. 344-5).

There is no population registration in Sweden since 1930 over religious belonging, which makes it impossible to give an exact number of Muslims in Sweden. Approximately 500,000 (5% of the population) is a qualified number often referred to in research within the field of religious studies. The number includes though everyone with assumed Muslim cultural background and does not state the number of practising Muslims. Some of the most common representation of Muslims in Sweden includes biases where they are presumed being connected with honour violence, oppression of women and as threats to security, often also represented as a contrast to 'Western values'. There is also a risk of being exposed to hate crimes, both as individuals and for Muslim institutions, such as mosques (Cato, 2012; Gardell, 2010; Gardell & Muftee, 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> Racial historicism refers to the prevailing presumptions on the historical immaturity of Europe's others, understood as an internally coherent group. 'The group is taken to have coalesced from the fragments of heterogenous dispersals in some distant past into a supposedly geographically bound coherence, with attendant physical traits and cultural habits' (Goldberg, 2010, p. 95).



## A change in position

Whiteness can be described as an unremarked and invisible position (Essed & Trienekens, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993), although, as Sara Ahmed notes, this invisibility only relates to those who possess whiteness (Ahmed, 2011, p. 136; Arbouz, 2012, p. 41). Ahmed goes on to describe it as a bad habit, 'as a series of actions that are repeated, forgotten, and that allow some bodies to take up space by restricting the mobility of others' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 129). Examples of how visibility and mobility can change for someone who went from passing or being regarded as white to wearing the hijab appears in my interviews.

Jennifer is 24 years old and lives in a smaller Swedish town. At the age of 17 she converted to Islam and started wearing the hijab. It swiftly became clear to her that, following her conversion, her position in society had changed. Still 17 years old, she began an internship in a retirement home where the staff treated her in a condescending way, addressing her as 'girl' rather than using her given name: 'Girl, come here; girl, do this' (Jennifer's interview). One day she was sharing a lunch break with several other staff members, who asked her if she was willing to talk about Islam with them. Jennifer agreed enthusiastically, but she recalls that their questions soon began to challenge her choices:

Jennifer: 'It started with, "What is Islam and why did you want to become a Muslim?" That's OK; they are questions I can answer. But then it turned to probing why I am following a man who lived some 1400 years ago: "How can you do that?" they asked. Then they said, "We don't understand why you are doing this." And they went even further. In the end, the way they were talking to me upset me so much that I told them I had to leave. [...] They were over 40 years old all of them and there were maybe three or four of them and they were kind of interrogating me.'

A similar event happened in class a short time after. Jennifer studies at Komvux (adult education offered by the municipality) and at the time she still considered herself newly converted. She was the only student wearing a hijab in the classroom, a question about the hijab was raised and was directed to Jennifer.

Jennifer: 'I didn't actually want to answer that question, because I was new [newly converted] and I knew there would be protests and I was not prepared. And I got plenty of counterarguments and many of them [other students] had lots

of opinions. Some were trying to defend me, but out of 30, maybe 3-4 were defending me and 26-27 were against me. And the teacher was neutral and didn't say anything. ... I just wanted to leave, and I did. I was upset, of course. I dropped out of the course and I didn't finish it until later, when there was a new teacher.'

Finally, Jennifer discussed her grades. She recounts how her Swedish language teacher started to take issues with her after she started wearing the hijab.

Jennifer: 'She graded me with an E. This was Swedish 1; yet when I finished Swedish 2, I got an A. It was very strange. [...] Before she graded me, we had a final exam and she didn't believe that I had written my own paper. I had been working on it for two weeks to get it really good, because I was worried that she would fail me. She started questioning the vocabulary [in Jennifer's test paper], asking me, "Do you understand this word? What is the meaning of that word?"'

Jennifer describes experiences that demonstrate that any everyday situation can turn into a defence of her choice to be a Muslim and wear a hijab. Her mobility in daily life has changed. She claims that before she started wearing the hijab, she had never undergone such questioning of herself as a person, or her choices, especially not by strangers. Now she has a feeling that she should always be prepared to defend her choice to be a Muslim. She also states that she has to perform much better now than before, in order to be seen as equally competent. This is a common experience among interviewees (Jakku & Waara, 2017). More than that, being presumed incompetent is also a common experience within academia among persons who differ from normative white, heterosexual, middle and upper-class statuses, also outside of Sweden (Muhs et al., 2012).

Living in Stockholm, 32-year-old Lena has had similar experiences. She converted to Islam aged 20 and for a short while she wore the hijab but does not do so any longer. She recalls a situation similar to Jennifer's, when she was studying for her master's degree wearing the hijab.

Lena: 'I remember, I came into the classroom wearing my hijab and he [the professor] didn't even try to hide his reaction. He was shocked and gave me a very strange look. Once he was talking about Islam in the classroom and about oppression and he looked at me and it felt very odd. [...] Suddenly I felt like I couldn't talk as much as before in the class. I was *that* girl, you know, the weird girl. I am used to being treated as a talented student, an intelligent girl, I have been told so many times. [...] It was such a difference.'

Ahmed (2006) theorizes about normativity as a trajectory maintained by whiteness and heterosexuality, among other things. When a person diverges from normative expectations, it can cause disharmony and, if prolonged, might lead to disciplinary measures. When a trajectory is disrupted, answers are demanded: why has it happened? Jennifer's experience in the retirement home is an example of this demand for answers in the face of what is perceived as an aberration, as well as a (conscious or unconscious) attempt on the part of the questioners to introduce disciplinary measures.

In a study conducted in Britain, Myfanwy Franks researched the experiences of white converts to Islam and raised the question of whether the converting women are considered by others to be transgressing the borders of whiteness. In response to her findings, Franks employs the concept of hybridity when navigating the understanding of whether the women were facing racism or religious discrimination. She notes that:

Making an all-time definition of racism is problematic because 'otherizing' and subsequent discrimination and injustice which take the form of 'racism' may overlap with discrimination based upon ethnicity, faith community, nationality and so on and is liable to shift. (Franks, 2000, p. 922)

She also notes a racism by proxy, whereby white hijab-wearing women in Britain are called 'white Pakis,' reflecting racism against Pakistanis with whom the women are accorded an imagined connection because of the hijab. Similarly, some of the interviewees in this study have pointed out that people tend to assume they are married to an Arab and are wearing the hijab for this reason. Several of them have also experienced being regarded as traitors to the nation or 'the Swedish race', a popular trope among populist nationalists and racists (c.f. Franks, 2000; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). For example, Bahaar is 55 years old and lives in a small town in Sweden. She converted to Islam in 2009 and started wearing the hijab a couple of months after her conversion. She tells that she was standing in line at a grocery store. A man behind her suddenly commented loudly: 'These black people and these white people who try to dress up as blacks by wearing a veil are disgusting (Bahaar's interview). In both this and Franks' example, our informants are identified as white, yet both draw attention to how remarks on the hijab and Muslim clothing as markers of otherness contribute to distancing their wearers from whiteness. In some instances, there even seems to be a desire to force a connection to these 'others'. The remark by Bahaar's persecutor clearly introduces the

notion that some clothes actually can or do instigate a crossing of the borders of whiteness by their wearers – at least in the eyes of some.<sup>8</sup>

Several hijab-wearing interviewees mentioned the discomfort of being in public spaces after terror attacks, and the curtailment of their mobility this involves. Even before the attack on Drottninggatan in Stockholm on April 7 2017, Bahaar had told me that she prefers to stay at home when something negative has been perpetrated by Muslims, such as the terrorist attacks in Istanbul and Paris. She feels that she is then more than usually exposed to people's suspicions and biases. Bahaar even considers it to have become inevitable that when terror attacks take place she will be the victim of negative reactions, such as someone shouting, 'Terrorist, go home'. This abuse also carries the idea that Bahaar does not belong in Sweden, that her home is somewhere else. Juliette Galonnier, in a study conducted in France and the USA, states that the 'Muslim terrorist' is a prominent figure in the racialisation of converts (Galonnier, 2015, p. 576).

## Coming out as a Muslim

For most of the women that were interviewed, coming out as a Muslim has been complicated in one way or another. Some of them have observed that even though they wear visibly Muslim clothing, 'coming out' moments still occur, for instance if they have made an appointment with someone over phone. One of the most remarkable of these was recounted by Hanna, who is 32, lives in Stockholm and converted to Islam in October 2012. She only wears the hijab on very special occasions, never on a daily basis or at work. Although she wears a Fatima's hand necklace, she remarks that it has become a fashion detail and, together with her appearance, she does not believe that people connect it with her being Muslim. In the beginning, right after her conversion, she had thought about the hijab a lot and she had wanted to wear it, but due to the stigma and opinions about the hijab as something negative among her family members, she felt that the disapproval would be too strong to deal with. She works with human rights and democracy issues and, initially, she did not tell many people about being Muslim, apart from her Muslim friends. At some point, however, she felt obligated to tell her boss, who

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<sup>8</sup> Moosavi (2015, p. 43) also accounts for instances where a conversion to Islam has been perceived in some sense as a 'racial' conversion.

dealt with it in a positive way but then told Hanna's colleagues without first gaining her permission. She does not have positive memories of the reactions of some of them:

Hanna: 'I sat at home crying before it was time to go into work, because I didn't know how to stand up for myself, then again I don't have very racist colleagues. But there is always a lot of discussion, because of islamophobia and the context being the way it is. [...] I remember that I almost had a burnout, because I got in for having the best answers on every bias. [...] To be honest, I believe this is why I couldn't make it; without the stigma I would probably practice the religion more.'

Bahaar tells me that coming out as a Muslim was not a dramatic event for her close family until she started wearing hijab. Her explanation led me to follow up the issue:

Nina: 'I have found from previous interviews that converts feel they must 'come out' as Muslims; sometimes they use the expression themselves, or I use it and they understand what I mean by it. If I understand you correctly, the coming out was not so difficult for you, while coming out as a hijabi was harder?'

Bahaar: 'Yes, because it became visible that I was a Muslim. When I just told them, but it couldn't be seen, it was like they didn't have to feel ashamed because of me.'

Thurfjell implies that attitudes towards religion in Sweden are in general sceptical and a gently critical approach is common in public discussion (Thurfjell, 2015, p. 29). As already noted, a common self-identification indicates that Sweden is secular, and religiosity is something that belongs to 'others'; it is, therefore, not a forced assumption that bodies that pass as Swedish and white are also read as secular or post-Christian. Coming out as having a religious identity other than post-Christian (Thurfjell, 2015) seems to cause a break in normative expectations, especially when declaring as a Muslim, due to the negative representation of Islam in Sweden (Thurfjell, 2015, p. 219).

## Moving in and out of whiteness

Several interviewees have described a feeling of being in an in-between position: neither fully part of the Muslim community, yet no longer a member of the non-Muslim population. Among other things, this affects the issue of gender roles. Lena felt that her gender position had changed in other people's' views, especially since she had started to wear the hijab.

Lena: 'Most of the classmates were nice. But – and this might be a subjective feeling of my own – suddenly with the hijab on I felt more like a woman, in a

negative way. A bit more unequal. [...] In some way I felt that the hijab made me more sexualized, that it was [interpreted] as a symbol of this.'

Several other interviewees have also experienced questions, both from people they do not know and from family, friends and colleagues, which are at some level centred on their gender role: whether their husbands beat them, for example, or if their husbands have forced them to wear the hijab.<sup>9</sup> In racialising discourses it is also common that non-white women are exotified and sexualised in a way that contrasts to representations of women more common in the spectrum of normative whiteness (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 26), which might explain Lena's experience of being more sexualised.

Hanna points out that converting means in some senses a radical change in a person's life: a break from an accustomed position of invisible whiteness. For her, the decisions to abstain from alcohol, read the Qur'an and pray, for instance, were choices aimed at enhancing her happiness. Yet she remarks that along with those choices come the interrogations that ultimately result in a feeling of not being accepted. This might also be analysed from the perspective of *degree* of Muslimness (Cato, 2012). Cato argues that Swedish political discourse accepts an interpretation of Islam that is liberal, moderate and secular; on the other hand, interpretations that fall outside the 'good and accepted' are portrayed as radical, conservative, patriarchal and deviant. Moreover, he argues that it is rare within European political discourse that the terms Islam and Muslim are used in a neutral manner, without connections to terms like 'good', 'mainstream', 'moderate' or 'radical'. In the European context it is also common that Muslim or ex-Muslim voices are promoted by the media when criticising Islam and Muslims (Cato, 2012, pp. 288-9). I have mentioned that for Bahaar's close family, her conversion was acceptable as long as it was not visible to the rest of the population. In an interview, Hanna tells me about a colleague who was concerned about the conversion itself, but who also marked some sort of limit by asking: 'But you don't pray, right?' She continues:

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<sup>9</sup> This impacts on gender roles of Muslim or 'other' men as well. The idea of Islam as an unchanging, violent and misogynist religion was a common figure during the colonial period. These representations are though older than that and they do in some form still operate today (Gardell, 2010, p. 67; Cato, 2012, p. 275).

Hanna: 'With intellectual people around me, who are not – I mean there are very few Sweden Democrats<sup>10</sup> – it should be one of the best environments to be in as a practicing Muslim. But I believe my experience would be different if I had been born a Muslim and it were clearer that I *am* a Muslim. Then it becomes diversity [she laughs] [...] So many things are encoded in social situations in which I take part – in which I am perceived as a white, non-religious person, that it is what other people believe I am.'

As we can see, Hanna encounters potential disciplinary measures or remarks, which can be connected to the discourse of normative secularity. Yet she also comments that not being represented as a 'real' Muslim means she cannot be regarded as providing a diversity alibi (c.f. Ahmed, 2011, p. 241). Diversity brought to institutions by bodies that break with whiteness, demonstrates the whiteness that is in place in them, thus the need for diversity (Ahmed, 2012, p. 34). However, while Hanna explains that she might be regarded as too white to function as the token 'other', 41 years old Rabia from Stockholm, who wears a hijab since 2012, observes that she often gets invited to public events (especially those with political content) to represent diversity. On the other hand, Rabia feels that she is often invited at someone else's expense, mainly because she believes that even other Muslims think that her whiteness gives her a different kind of voice than that of a less white-passing person. Commonly in white experience, whiteness is, in effect, not acknowledged as a privilege, however my interviewees are highly aware of the benefits their whiteness may accord them in some situations, if it is acknowledged. This confirms Franks' assumption in her study, mentioned earlier, that the situation of her interviewees in England is generally likely to be easier than that of their sisters who never pass as white. Similar accounts have been made in the Netherlands (Vroon, 2014, p. 87) and Germany (Özyürek, 2010, pp. 173-4) Hanna, for example, notes that she has a choice in most situations, either to go with the flow or to stand up for who she is. She also acknowledges that many of the privileges her whiteness and Swedishness bestow are still there.

Hanna: 'I feel like I am bobbing in a position in between. Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite. I can select when to be visible; I can choose [to show] parts of my identity in a way that most people can't, and it is a huge privilege to be able to

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<sup>10</sup> Sweden Democrats is a anti-immigration and anti-Muslim party with roots in white supremacy neo-Nazi movement. The party is represented in the parliament since 2010 and they are for the moment among the three biggest parties in Sweden with estimated support from approximately 20 % of the Swedish voters.

do that. As you say, I can choose to not say anything [about being a Muslim] in a job interview, yet in other situations I can say I am a Muslim and be part of a religious context.'

## Conclusion

Racialisation is common in Sweden on both institutional and structural levels, as well as on the everyday level of interactions between people (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 17). Some of this racialisation is clearly visible in the experiences shared by my interviewees. If one element characterizing whiteness is its invisibility, for the most part, the hijab-wearing women in this study no longer possess it. Meanwhile, becoming a Muslim but not wearing 'Muslim clothes' does not change the possibilities for passing as white in the same way, although it still gives rise to the often-actualized process of 'coming out', which, in turn may affect mobility. Some might argue, then, that it is all a matter of religion, but this over-simplifies the different ways racism operates. We have instances where whiteness is clearly at the heart of the issue: for example, when it is assumed that a woman in a hijab is unable to speak Swedish or is asked about her origin on the assumption of its being somewhere other than Sweden. A version of this is when the race-traitor discourse is brought to the fore. Then, informants are identified as white but inappropriate in assumed behaviour. Yet the dimensions of religion and secularity clearly relate to the theories of Swedishness and whiteness discussed in this article, since they obviously impact on how people are racialised; consequently, Franks suggestion of applying the term hybrid in analysis of multiple dimensions is a useful one in the context of this study.

If we may conclude, as I do, that the hijab essentialises and highlights everything about the converts' break with normative white Swedishness, what are the outcomes of this? The interviewees repeatedly made it clear that, with the profession of their new faith, but more specifically the donning of the hijab, they have lost at least part of their 'invisible' mobility; this is illustrated by their references to obstacles in educational contexts, at work, in daily interactions with strangers and friends and family and so on. It is not seldom that these instances even carry components of violence – physical, verbal as well as psychological (Jakku & Waara, 2017). Racialising practices often incorporate the idea of categories through which we make sense of people, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the interviewees in this study seem to disrupt the



discursive categories of Swedishness and whiteness as well as Muslimness. This in turn leads to confusion among the people they meet, a thing which curtails their freedom of activity and speech and, in the long run, often leads to otherising, discrimination and pure racism.

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