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Drawing Boundaries Around Muslim Identities

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# He Goes by Mo: Drawing Boundaries Around Muslim Identities<sup>\*†</sup>

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## Abstract

Given the socio-political environment of the United States, the identities of religious and racialized Muslims have been scrutinized. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews with religious Muslim American men, I explore discussions that indicate a preference for some strategies for managing stigma over others. I focus specifically on name-changing as a strategy that is polarizing in interview data. Based on my findings I conclude that religious names are a prominent identifier of Muslim identities and may be managed by changing names or choosing nicknames. Furthermore, statements made by Muslim men that center on the management of identities through name-changing come with ingroup value-judgements which appear to reveal a hierarchy in the desirability of certain stigma management strategies over others for these religious Muslim men. This preferential stigma management can be interpreted as boundary work whereby religious Muslims—who regularly attend mosques—construct meaning around unapologetically presenting one’s religious identity. This investigation is relevant to discussions that center on the racialization process, boundary work, and the experiences of Muslims in the post-terror United States.

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In the twenty-first century, Muslim identities and those perceived to be Muslim have been scrutinized at the individual, local, national, and international levels in the form of political backlash, discrimination, violence, and social stigma (Akram and Johnson 2002; Allen 2018; Garner and Selod 2015; Rana 2011; Razack 2008; Selod 2015; Zopf 2018). Popularly, this social scrutiny is understood to result from the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (Akram and Johnson 2002; Singh 2002). September 11<sup>th</sup> (9/11) is commonly understood as the date of a series of international terrorist attacks made against the U.S. that are attributed to al-Qaeda. Most scholarship views the events of 9/11 as one of the most pivotal points in modern history, at least with respect to anti-Muslim discrimination (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009; Akram and Johnson 2002; Cankar 2002). As Singh (2002) offers: “[t]he hate crimes that followed the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks . . . were unique in their severity and extent” (3).

The data from a variety of organizations and agencies, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, support these claims (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009; Kishi [Pew Research Center] 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center 2012 and 2017). The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR 2004) recorded growth in the annual number of reports of discrimination filed from 365 to 525—or 44%—from 2001 to 2002 (11). These numbers continued to increase through 2008, the last year for which this data is publicly available (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2009: 8). Additionally, per the Pew Research Center (Kishi 2016), anti-Muslim physical assaults reported to the FBI increased from 12 in 2000 to 93—or 675%—in 2001. Tellingly, this number would be surpassed in 2016, the last year for which this report provides data (Kishi 2016). Since 2002 these assaults have sporadically but consistently increased (Kishi 2016). These measures are not resultant of some rogue individuals; the Southern Poverty Law Center (2017) reports that anti-Muslim hate groups have increased since September 11<sup>th</sup>, growing the most—197%—between 2015 and 2016.

While many have detailed trends of Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims, considerably fewer scholars focus on the ways Muslims navigate these trends. Widespread hostility towards Islam and persons assumed to be associated with it necessitates defensive responses from Muslims and those presumed to be Muslim. The primary focus of this paper is the discussion of the preference, by some groups, of certain identity negotiations over others. I analyze stigma management through discussions about name-changing by religious Muslim men. By name-changing, I refer to the decisions by men who possess racialized Muslim identities to go by a nickname in order to forgo discrimination and avoid the scrutinization of their identities. Discussions about name-changing reveal complex negotiations of identity necessary to forgo the scrutiny of anti-Islamic sentiment in the post-terror United States. The purpose of this paper is to address the following research questions: (1) How do religious Muslim men (in this locale) discuss name-

changing as a method of managing stigma? (2) What do these conversations reveal about the valuation of certain identities and practices for Muslim men (in this locale)? (3) What do these negotiations reveal about the boundary-work of religious Muslim men (in this locale)? This investigation is relevant to discussions that center on the racialization process, boundary work, and the experiences of Muslims in the post-terror United States. Additionally, this paper seeks to address Garner and Selod's (2015) call for "fieldwork-based studies (particularly those in which Muslims are the subjects of interviews and/or ethnographies)" (10).

### *LITERATURE REVIEW*

Despite the drastic shifts outlined above, the events of 9/11 must also be understood within the context of twentieth and twenty-first century international political economies and relationships. Sociologists argue that Muslims and Arabs have been constructed as perpetual threats in Western societies since the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Garner and Selod 2015; Mastnak 2010; Selod 2016: 63). The social construction of Muslim men as uncivilized and violent enemies has roots in the Crusades. In recent history, Muslims' ethnic and religious identities have come to take on nationalist meanings and stand in contradiction to dominant White-Christian imperial powers (Mastnak 2010; Rana 2011; Selod 2015; Werbner 2005; Zopf 2018). Finally, some scholars (Mastnak 2010; Rana 2011) have linked Islamophobia in the West to the fall of the Soviet Union, arguing that Islam became the new conceptual opponent to democracy, around which financial and military resources and support could be mobilized. The framing of Muslims as anti-American threats is linked to political-military involvement in the Middle East and contributes to the experiences of religiously practicing Muslims at present.

In American sociology, this framing of Muslims is increasingly being discussed as a form of racism, even though Islam is officially a religion and not a race (Garner and Selod 2015; Jaffe-Walter 2016; Rana 2011; Razack 2008; Selod 2015; Zopf 2018). Some scholars have contested the analysis of Islamophobia as a form of racism, arguing that animosity towards religion reflects a religious hatred, not a racial one (Garner and Selod 2015). However, per Garner and Selod (2015), such an understanding of Islamophobia is based on problematic conceptualizations of what race is or how racism functions. Race is a social construction; it is not rooted in biology (Golash-Boza 2016). Rather, race is constituted and reconstituted through social-political events both contemporarily and throughout history. It "has historically been derived from both physical and cultural characteristics" (Garner and Selod 2015: 12). This derivation includes cultural attributes such as one's faith tradition. For instance, diaspora Jews have historically been the victims of entrenched systemic racism, with fast networks of pseudo-scientific justifications, though at present many of these individuals are categorized as white. The process

of creating and recreating race has been called “racialization,” a term Omi and Winant (2015) operationalize as “assigning racial meaning to previously unclassified relationships, social practices, or groups” (111). “Racialization provides the language needed to discuss newer forms of racism that are not only based on skin-tone, as well as other forms” (Garner and Selod 2015: 12). In the context of the term and concept of racialization, the stigmatization of groups presumed to be associated with Islam can be read as the construction of a dominant racial frame.

The use of racism to describe the experiences of Muslims does give rise to issues of conflation. For instance, what then do scholars mean when they refer to Muslims as a racialized group? Meer (2008) calls “Muslim” a quasi-ethnic sociological formation, meaning that the social designation of “Muslim” exists in an overlap of overarching racialization, religious identities, ethnicities, and nationalities of origin. For instance, an individual whose family is from Syria may religiously identify as Muslim, come from a family that has historically practiced Islam, hail from a region commonly associated with Islam, and fit dominant group phenotypical characteristics presumed to be derived from some “Arab racial essence.” In contrast, individuals racialized as Muslim by dominant group members may not religiously identify as Muslim—or fit any of the aforementioned descriptors. Consequently, racialization is tied up with meaning that is being made around both religious and ethnic identities, namely that Muslims are racialized as threats to safety and security in democratic nations. When scholars use the term “Muslim” carelessly, they conflate Arabs, South Asians, and other groups as Muslims and reify broader racialization. This study analyzes the experiences of religiously practicing Muslims with racialization. Thus, when I use the term “Muslim” I am referring to adherents of Islam—specifically, individuals who attend religious services at a mosque, who claim the religion for themselves.

This issue of conflation could be addressed by studying racism against Muslims using boundary-based theoretical frameworks. Boundary-work has been used to study oppression, stratification, and racism, specifically against migrant groups (Alba 2005; Gerson and Peiss 1985; Massey and Sanchez 2010; Sanders 2002; Vasquez 2010 and 2011; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). To date, little scholarship on Islamophobia has explicitly drawn on boundary scholarship. I argue that conceptually focusing on boundaries could offer a unique opportunity to analyze the quasi-ethnic sociological nature of the Muslim labels and identities. In recent scholarship (Massey and Sanchez 2010; Vasquez 2010 and 2011; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009), boundaries have been used to analyze the assimilative experiences of Latinx immigrants to the U.S. These scholars find that within the context of structural racism and dominant group racial framing, subordinated migrant groups “broker” boundaries (Massey and Sanchez 2010) and create meaning around their

immigrant identities. In their work on Mexican American and Native American boundary work, Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) state:

We compare these groups because they resist their marginalization by rearticulating the same racialized terms that others use to categorize them, and reinscribe this language with different values. Since the American understanding of minorities is racial, these two groups use the same language of race but invest it with different meanings as they draw boundaries to positively distinguish themselves from both negative popular conceptions of them and dominant American culture (3).

This scholarship may yield transferable themes because like Latinx immigrants, Muslims have become racialized as threats to national security in the U.S. society (Romero and Zarrugh 2018; Zopf 2018). Furthermore, my findings suggest that Muslims interact with and create meaning around religious identities in response to dominant frames to respond to discrimination.

In their most basic form, “boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space;” these basic distinctions may be further referred to as symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168). Symbolic boundaries can then become social boundaries once they become objectified through unequal resource distribution or policy (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Ultimately then, boundaries are about relationships between socially determined groups. Boundary scholarship provides a framework that flexibly discusses relationships rather than reified social groupings. Thus, I can discuss dominant racial framing that affects persons circumstantially read to be affiliated with terror—including religious Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, South Asians, and other persons perceived to fit a “Muslim phenotype”—as one boundary, while at the same time separating this discussion from the response of religious Muslims, who may be more or less visibly recognized as Muslim and therefore experience varying amounts of scrutiny from dominant group members. Boundary-based frameworks could enable scholars to analyze how religious Muslims who experience racism may respond by creating meaning around their religious identities. Scholars have also demonstrated that experiences of Islamophobia and racialization experiences for Muslims are frequently intersectional (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009; Cainkar and Selod 2018; Selod 2016 and 2019). For instance, Selod (2019) finds that in the aftermath of terror, while Muslim men and women are both subject to increased surveillance by the state and private citizens, surveillance occurs in gendered patterns and has gendered and racial logics. For example, men are constructed as truly violent threats to American democracy, and women are marked as more passive victims of patriarchy and a backwards culture (Razack 2008; Selod 2019). I focus specifically on the experiences of men, because relatively little literature in the field of Islamophobia focuses exclusively on masculine experiences. I argue

that Muslim men represent a theoretically significant subordinate masculine group. While they enjoy relative privileges as men, they experience subordination to a hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) that is bound up with “whiteness,” nativism, and Judeo-Christianity. Other studies of subordinated masculine groups have demonstrated that subsequent ways of “doing’ masculinity” are shaped by intersectional forces (Ocampo 2012). Because religious identity is likely important to Muslim men, I argue that Muslim men will respond to discrimination in ways that reflect said strong sense of religious identity.

As previously indicated, I argue that names are a particularly important feature of Muslim identities that may require intentional management. Specifically, these names are important with respect to the identities of Muslims because they function as “stigma symbols” (Goffman 1963). Goffman defines stigma symbols as “signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual” (Goffman 1963: 44). That is, stigma symbols draw the attention of social actors to potentially stigmatizing identities or presumed identities. Names are particularly salient for religious Muslims because even converts or men who possess other identities that take prominence in their social interactions may possess religious names. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (2008) tracked recipient reported Muslim “features” or “triggers” and their relationship to instances of discrimination against Muslims. Muslim names constituted 22.17% of the features that contributed to this anti-Muslim discrimination in 2007 (CAIR 2008). Names only fell behind two other categories, “Ethnicity/Religion” and “Organization/Activist,” which constituted 40.84% and 23.15%, respectively, of all reported triggers. The next most statistically descriptive feature was the “Hijab/Head Scarf” category, which only accounted for 6.22% of incidences of the mistreatment of Muslims. In a similarly focused study in Sweden, Khosravi (2012) tracks immigrant-origin applications to formally change Muslim-sounding names. He finds that names were frequently changed to effect disassociation between their bearers and Islamic and Arabic identities. Participants reported that after name-changes, they enjoyed benefits such as an increased likelihood of getting call backs for job openings. This data supports my argument that names are a particularly important identifier with respect to Muslim racialization and ensuing incidences of discrimination and, more broadly, stigmatization.

## *METHODS*

The data discussed in this paper comes from 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews (Gilham 2004) with men who attend 3 Islamic centers in a large Mid-western city that I call Greensburg (pseudonym). However, the research that

contributed to the development of this paper began before then. I spent just under two years—from the spring of 2016 well into 2017—attending religious services, events in the community, and playing basketball with Muslim men in Greensburg. This field-time informed both my research methodologies and the theoretical frameworks through which I collected and interpreted research data. As such, this time was not simply about building rapport with the subjects of my study. It is further worth noting that as this research took place during the campaign and election of president Donald J. Trump, the inflammatory rhetoric of that campaign certainly affected the research data that I collected.

Per Small (2009), ethnographic studies using qualitative interviewing do not seek to develop generalizable results from a representative group. Rather, qualitative studies proceed from a different set of epistemological assumptions. Thus, I sampled respondents until I reached theoretical saturation, where many of the themes that emerged and were the focus of interviews were repeated and I was no longer hearing new things from respondents. The use of qualitative research methods permits researchers to address and develop understanding and depth of meaning. While results may be transferable to broader groups of Muslims, I do not seek to make that claim in this paper. Rather, I seek to address how Muslim-American men make sense of and negotiate potentially stigmatizing identities and scenarios, and the meanings made around these phenomena. My research focuses specifically on the experiences of men. This, in part, can be attributed to my own limitations as a social researcher. I am a white man and a non-Muslim. Thus, because I sampled from individuals I met at mosques—a place where men and women are traditionally separated—I limited my analysis to men both out of convenience and to ensure that I did not inadvertently offend community members. This focus is additionally justified by a gap in the research literature. Sociologists have argued that gender is important with respect to the stigmatization of Muslims (Razaack 2008; Selod 2019). Despite this acknowledgement, relatively little research to date has analyzed the experiences of exclusively male actors in grappling with anti-Islamic backlash and stigma. My research provides not only a sample of masculine experiences, but an analysis of said experiences with anti-Islamic stigma.

My sample is from a diverse group of Muslim men. Study participants range in age from 18 to 81, with a median of 36 years. Notably, religious practice—measured by mosque attendance—ranges from not often or once weekly to 5 times daily. Eight of the 15 respondents had immigrated to the U.S. Participants had family origins in “Africa,” America, Egypt, Iraq, India, Libya, Somalia, Palestine, Pakistan, Turkey, and Yemen. Three of the 15 respondents were converts to Islam, or by their description, were not born to a Muslim family. Respondents were highly educated (most were in or had completed collegiate education). In terms of occupation, the participants in this study are relatively upper and upper-middle-



class; interviewees were accounting professors, bilingual instructors (public school system), cardiologists, computer and software engineers, data administrators (government agencies), Imams, Islamic school teachers, medical scribes, medical researchers, non-profit employees, small business owners, and students.

After spending some time in the field, I procured interviews through a combination of availability, purposive, and snowball sampling (Charmaz 2012). Sampling techniques were contingent on participant receptivity in the field. I met interviewees at a location of their choosing; this included homes, coffee shops, religious centers, and my own office. Interviews typically lasted about an hour to an hour and a half in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed with the exception of one participant who requested to not be recorded. To address this interview, I took physical notes during our time together and immediately following I recorded my own account of this interview in my car. A discussion of names, or name-changing, was not originally built into the structure of my interviews. Rather, I used grounded theory: as themes emerged in interview data, these themes informed what I focused on during subsequent interviews. As my research evolved, I began to incorporate questions into my interview structure where I directly engaged with interviewees on the topic of Muslim names. Transcriptions from interviews were member-checked except for one man, who I was unable to contact after interviews.

All study participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. I allowed all participants the opportunity to select pseudonyms for themselves. Only six men elected to do so. Names for the other nine men were either common religious Muslim names or selected based on themes from the interviews, e.g. Aidan, Mostafa, Ali—who was a fan of Muhammad Ali—or Abraham—who spoke extensively about the similarities between Islam and other “Abrahamic” religions. I acknowledge that the use of pseudonyms to protect identities presents some methodological issues to my analysis. Since discussions of name-changing are central to my analysis, the reader’s knowledge of original names would be desirable. However, as I will demonstrate, my analysis more crucially focuses on the ways that participants discuss the practice of name-changing, rather than the actual practice itself. Thus, I argue that my analysis is not harmed by my protecting participant names in write-ups because the principle discussions of name-changing remain the same. In a similarly focused study, Khosravi (2012) merely provides descriptions of participants—e.g., Iranian-born female—rather than developing pseudonyms. I insert both pseudonyms and descriptors for the sake of readability but follow the precedent set by Khosravi by including descriptors with pseudonyms in my write-up. Following interview transcription, I member checked interviews by sending email transcripts to study participants requesting feedback as they deemed necessary. Only one participant

(the participant who declined to be interviewed) recommended a change: he suggested a simple name-change.

### *FINDINGS*

Names stood apart as a prominent trend early in the research process. In fact, it became evident that interviewees were familiar with name-changing by the end of the fourth interview. This findings section is broken down into the following primary sections: *Managing Muslim Names*, *Assessing Name Management*, and *Drawing Boundaries*. Men in this study articulated that name-changing was a common response to anti-Islamic stigmatization, and shared alternative ways that they managed this stigma.

#### *Managing Muslim Names*

Names are unique and prominent personal identifiers of men's Muslim identities. Recall that Goffman (1963) operationalizes the term "stigma symbol" to discuss characteristics or identifiers that contribute to an individual or group's heightened association with a stigmatizing status. In my broader research, interviews revealed 6 potential stigma symbols that contributed to Muslim men's identification by dominant group members. These include: names, accent, dress/beards, religious practice, association with Muslim women, and association with Muslim men. I argue that names are particularly salient symbols for religious Muslim men because names are perhaps the most universal identifiers for these identities. This claim is seemingly supported by CAIR's 2008 Civil-Rights Report discussed previously. Even religious Muslims whose identities are less socially visible may hold names that act as a cue of foreignness. For example, Red is a 26-year-old American-born Muslim who describes himself as half-American/half-Iraqi; here he discusses how his birth name reveals his Muslim identity:

I know some stories with people that didn't get it as easy as I did—probably because of the fact that they couldn't tell, until they heard what my name was.

My name gives it away—maybe not gives it away that I am Muslim, but it gives it away that I am something different. After looking at me and thinking that I look like everyone else, and then finding out I have a different name.

Red articulates that he is not visibly Muslim. By this, I infer that in most contexts other social actors would not be able to determine his religious or "Muslim-raced" (Garner and Selod 2015) identity by his physical appearance or presentation. Many would likely presume that Red was non-Muslim and white. In terms of stigma management, we might discuss this ability to avoid confrontation or scrutiny as

“passing” (Goffman 1963: 73; Park 2002: 32). Red compares his experience with those of others, which I interpret to mean other more visible Muslims, stating that he lives a life of relative privilege. Despite his ability to pass as a dominant group member, his given name is a salient personal identifier that more explicitly reveals his Muslim identity. Red’s name distinguishes him from others. Even if the name does not mark him as Muslim, it singles him out as foreign or “other.” Consequently, Red found it necessary to negotiate his identity by concealing this stigma symbol and offering a dis-identifier (Goffman 1963: 44). He offers: “I am going to be honest. I do it too [name-change] because sometimes it’s just easier and quicker if people think that you are one of them.” Here we can see that, at least in Red’s understanding, Muslim identities are stigmatized and thus worth negotiating. It is additionally noteworthy that Red selected a particularly racially or religiously “neutral” name as a pseudonym for this study. By neutral, I insert the value judgement that this name does not sound particularly “Muslim.”

Red was the only participant who openly discussed how his nickname was intentionally crafted to forgo anti-Islamic stigma. During our interview, Red shared the process by which he chose to adopt a nickname as he entered middle school. Red’s personal transition of moving to a new school and the next level of education coincided with a national transition from pre- to post-9/11 social politics. Recall that the pre- and post-9/11 stigmatization, policing, and discrimination against Muslim bodies differ both qualitatively and quantitatively (Council on American Islamic Relations 2008) and may have required protective action by social actors—specifically Muslims. This report on its own is relatively insignificant. However, other interview data suggests that name-changing is a broader issue in religious Muslim communities. When these data-points are considered with the nature of religious identities, they are telling of broader trends and suggest future directions for research.

Even though most interviewees did not report that they themselves negotiated stigma by changing their names, the men I interviewed discussed name-changing using rhetorically similar patterns and narratives. This leads to the primary focus of this paper: that men strategically negotiated stigmatized identities in ways that created apparent boundaries between Muslims whose religious identities were more and less salient. By salient I mean visibly presented via name, phenotype, public religious practice, religious dress, etc. Most men reported name-changing and other identity concealing stigma management strategies in the third-person. This response was often prompted by the following question: *Are there people that you know that have had to or have changed their lives in response to the changes in treatment of Muslims following terrorist attacks?* 10 of the 15 interviewees discussed Muslim name-change as something that other people did, citing how people that they knew adopted nicknames to avoid confrontation. In one such

instance, Alex, a 23-year-old white Muslim convert, provided an example of a high school friend who changed their name when confronted with possible mistreatment:

So, those Somalis, they were given some grief, and one interesting thing that I have noticed, is that a lot of them piggyback off of that fact that they might be misidentified as another ethnicity. So, there is a brother Mohammad. He took the name Mo. You know, so people wouldn't identify him as easily as a Muslim.

This instance is unique from the other examples of name-change that I will discuss, because in this example Alex reports knowing an individual who goes by a nickname to conceal his racialized-religious identity. Alex connects this instance of name-changing to Mohammad's (Mo's) ability to pass as a non-Muslim African American. Thus, in this participant's estimation, name-changing could be a conscious strategy aimed at minimizing conflict induced by Muslims' religious-racial identities. Furthermore, this estimation appears consistent with Red's rationale for selecting a nickname—that ultimately life was easier for those who were not readily identified as Muslims by dominant group-members. Similarly, Zain cites a report from a friend:

A few weeks ago, a friend was telling me that he was coaching a soccer team, and it was full of refugee kids, and most of these kids their names were Mohammad. But every time he would call out a name, a kid would come up, and he would say, "Oh, I go by Mo." And, he was just joking about how every kid would go by Mo.

Zain's report is even more abstracted than a standard third-person narrative. Whereas Alex's report was about someone that he had a direct relationship with, Zain's example was a report passed along from someone that he knew, adding another level of personal-distance to his assessment of name-changing as a strategy for grappling with anti-Muslim stigmatization. As I will demonstrate, discussing name-changing using third-person narratives and other rhetorical strategies provided participants with space to provide commentary or otherwise distance themselves from stigma-concealing practices—namely name-changing—that they viewed as unfavorable.

In addition to discussing Muslim name-changing in the third-person, men in this study frequently pointed to the same example: a Mohammad who chooses to go by Mo. Unlike Alex, who reported personally knowing a Mohammad who goes by Mo, a majority of men reported general hypothetical examples or shared narratives. I categorize the Mohammad-Mo example of Muslim name-changing as a shared narrative because it was so frequently cited in these discussions. It is further worth noting that I did not introduce this example in interviews; that is, interviewees generated this example for discussion on their own. One participant who used this example was Aidan, a 49-year-old Pakistani immigrant:

Yes, so people—you see it all the time—one example: people named Mohammad, they go by Mo. ... So, people do change their name. They Americanize the name or they shorten their name so that maybe it will sound less Muslim.

Here, Aidan provides what appears to be a hypothetical situation where an individual named Mohammad elects to go by Mo. He connects this practice of name-changing directly to “sounding less Muslim.” Ali, a 35-year-old black-and-white-racially-mixed convert, similarly offers: “I think Arabs—many of them are more conscious of it. Mohammed becomes Mo or Mike, or Hatim becomes Tim. They’ll change their name.” In Ali’s example, it is worth noting that he suggests that Arabs—who may more closely fit the phenotypical ideal of a Muslim—may be more likely to name-change. Again, what is most noteworthy is that interviewees frequently use abstracted rhetorical devices to discuss name-change, and in addition they frequently used the same hypothetical example—Mohammad who goes by Mo—to make their case. These shared narratives suggest that name-change is a common subject among these religious men.

Despite the frequent citation of the Mohammad to Mo shared narrative in interviews, interview data were not in agreement about this narrative’s origin. Some interviewees seemed to be of the position that this example naturally arose because Mohammad is one of the most popular names for men in the world (and the name of Islam’s most important prophet). Others cited debates and discussions from religious leaders on the topic of name-changing that used this example. And again, others reported actually knowing a Mohammad who goes by Mo. Zain, who was previously quoted, attempted to pinpoint this origin:

Yeah, that’s a pretty common example, just because Mohammad is the most common name in Islam, and it’s the name of the last prophet in Islam. So, sometimes you’ll hear religious scholars bring up that name, and they’ll talk about how “you’ve been given such a beautiful name, why do you need to shorten it to Mo?”

Zain provides two possible sources of the Mohammad-Mo name-change example as he attempts to clarify where such rhetorical devices come from. This uncertainty was more broadly evident, as other interviewees were decidedly split on the matter. Regardless of the origin of shared language, most of the men in this study either used the Mohammad-Mo example to broadly discuss name-changing or were familiar with the example themselves. I infer from these examples that name-changing is a critical issue among religious Muslim and racialized Muslim groups, and thus warrants further analysis by identity researchers. As previously discussed, interviewees often paired abstracted discussions of identity concealing strategies

with value-judgements of the discussed practice. The following section will unpack this phenomenon.

### *Assessing Name Management*

In the broader study, reports of identity negotiation techniques seemed to follow a pattern whereby participants generally discussed identity negotiations that concealed or withdrew religious identities in the third-person. I attribute this patterning to Muslim identities being a “quasi-ethnic sociological formation” (Meer 2008)—discussed previously. That is, the identity negotiations of Muslim men are complex because, even though religious Muslims desire to distance themselves from racialized-stigma (Rana 2011), these men do not desire to do so at the expense of integrity to their religious, ethnic, or national identities. This preference is evidenced by the fact that many interviewees were generally critical of identity-concealing strategies for navigating stigma. For instance, Aidan critiques his parents’ suggestion to keep a low profile following 9/11:

I remember my parents just saying, “Alright, be quiet and keep a low profile.” And I am like, “What do you mean keep a low profile?” ... [To his Father] “You’ve been here since 1965. You’ve been living in this country twice as long as you were living anywhere else. You’ve lived here. You’re American. Your kids are American. Your grandkids are American.” He [Aidan’s father] said, “Well it doesn’t matter. Just be quiet, because you’re Muslim and you don’t know what they could do.”

While many of the men in this study were aware that some Muslims might “lay low” to avoid social scrutiny or out of fear of American backlash, most of the men were critical of such practices. In this instance, Aidan critiques his parents’ requests that his family “keep a low profile” by asserting his American identity. He expresses frustration that his parents—who are established Americans and contributors to American society—would feel so threatened as to fear for their family’s wellbeing. It is noteworthy that most men who openly critiqued identity concealing strategies acknowledged that they enjoyed more privileges than other members of Muslim-American communities, such as U.S. citizenship, English language proficiency, ambiguity in their racialization as Muslims (e.g. being white or black), being a man and thus not wearing the hijab, etc. Nonetheless, approximately of 11 of 15 interviewees critiqued various forms of concealing one’s religious identity. Even Red—who managed stigma through name-changing—was familiar with this general theme: “But, as far as someone changing their name from Mohammad to Mo—cool thing is—a friend of mine made a poem about that . . . sort of ridiculing that.” Thus, most of the men in this study readily offered the same critical valuations of name-changing as a method of stigma-management. Those

who did not make such valuations were—for the most part—aware of such valuations.

Critiques of identity strategies for managing stigma were most frequently directed at name-changing. These discussions also reveal trends of boundary negotiations around religious Muslim identities, whereby attempts to “pass” as dominant group—non-Muslim—Americans is interpreted as conceding a dimension of one’s Muslim identity. In one such instance, Johnny discussed his brother’s use of a nickname:

I think my brother has assimilated a little too much into the American culture. He is trying to conceal his identity, in terms of his Muslim faith and stuff like that, I think he even goes by a nickname, or something—just so he doesn’t have to explain something. So, it just affects some people differently.

Johnny inserts the value judgement that his brother changes his name because he has assimilated “too much into the American culture.” Similarly, in other interviews, men referred to name-changing as “selling-out.” This assessment of “selling-out” or “too much” can be read as a threat to one’s Muslim identity. Pasha, a 23-year-old whose parents are from Libya, expresses a similar sentiment about general identity concealing strategies. “I’ll say this, a lot of them feel like they need to be more Americanized—more assimilated into the culture. And at the same time, they kind of lose their Muslim identity.” The frequent combination of distancing third-person narratives and critical value judgements in interviewees’ discussions of name-changing suggests that these men found stigma management through name-changing to be problematic. Pasha and Johnny’s shared sentiments can be read as indicative of authenticity boundary work, whereby the dichotomy between “Muslim” and “American” is rearticulated by subordinated actors and used to construct an authentically Muslim identity. Within this dichotomy, authentic Muslims do not seek to conceal their religious identity.

### *Drawing Boundaries*

Rather than using identity-concealing strategies for managing stigma, many of the men in this study preferred practices that could be categorized as “acts of everyday resistance” (Collins 2004) or education (Schroeder and Mowen 2014). For instance, Ali was not willing to, as he saw it, obscure his identity to avoid stigma and discrimination: “I want to be recognized as a Muslim. If that’s [discrimination] what comes with it [being recognized as Muslim], that’s fine. I’m proud to be Muslim.” A clear majority of interviewees expressed a similar sentiment, that they were proud of their religious identity and did not wish to hide it in most settings. Likewise, Mostafa, a 23-year-old immigrant with Palestinian

origins, uses a personal experience to make the case that openly presenting his religious identity is the best way that he can overcome discrimination:

We were at a lunch table and . . . when they found out I was Muslim . . . They were shocked that I was Muslim. They told me, “I would of never have known, you're a normal person, you're totally cool.” That was their first exposure to Muslims. I think that’s the best way to convey who we really are to people. Just be you and just tell them, “Hey, we’re normal people. We’re cool.”

Mostafa states that through being himself—a “normal” guy who is a Muslim—he was able to have a positive impact on the way that non-Muslims view the collective religious group. Similarly, other participants cited openly presenting their identities, being visible and good citizens, and engaging in dialogue with dominant group members about Islam as ways that they effectually impacted dominant group framing of Muslims as a collective.

Multiple symbolic and social boundaries shape, inform, and are negotiated by Muslim identities. For instance, most of the men in this study were conscious of popular dominant racial framing of Muslims as potential terrorists and threats to Western democracies. The effects of this framing are evident in the actions of many of the men in this study. In one case, Kareem discusses how he must take extra cautions in raising his children because of the rhetoric that surrounds his religious identity:

Now that I have kids, I am fearful for them. I want to make sure that they’re educated and have a sense of being Muslim—and also kind of shield them from the negative perception that’s common here. My oldest is seven. I think all those things are way too heavy for a seven-year-old to contemplate. [ . . . ] I don’t watch the news in front of my kids. Before I don’t think it would have mattered. I’m nervous about what kind of commentary they’ll hear and how I’ll have to explain the world.

It is easy—in principle—to appreciate the direct effect that Islamophobic discourse has on Kareem’s parenting. Like most parents, Kareem wants his children to develop a positive sense of identity; for his family, this includes their religious identity. Here he states that he tries to control what commentary on global events his children hear—specifically, commentaries that directly involve Muslims. Elsewhere, Kareem discussed how he would address his children engaging in identity concealing strategies such as name-changing:

If I overheard my kids doing that, I would get on them. Names are traditional. Your name is what I gave you. I mean they can have nicknames, as long as it’s not obviously trying to disguise their identity . . .



Here Kareem speaks to an anecdotal scenario where his children elected to go by nicknames. If Kareem's children were to change names, he says that he "would get on them." Taken together, these quotes on raising children, and consequently identity management and development, are telling. Children—whose identities might not be firmly established—must be both protected and guided in order to develop authentic religious identities. Authentic Muslims—according to Kareem's logic—do not conceal their religious identity. This similar logic was repeated in several interviews.

The men in this study also directly connected religious teachings to their experiences with Islamophobia. This repeated connection of religious sense-making to dealing with discrimination is important because it reinforces a boundary often neglected by dominant group members—that is, the boundary between religious and non-religious, or at least "less-religious," Muslims. By the accounts of the individuals in this study, Islam offers a source of guidance amidst rampant racism and hate. Red comments on the importance of these teachings:

Whatever the situation is, we can find a parallel of that or an example of that and we can look in our scriptures of similar lessons on that—and we can look at the life of our prophet and see how those are dealt with and see what we are supposed to be doing about them.

Kareem similarly offers:

They're [teachings relevant to experience] too numerous to name, because—I don't know if you know this, the history of the early community of Muslims—they started out as a tiny minority surrounded by an antagonistic majority. There were sanctions against them, there were threats on their life. You don't have to be a really deep philosopher to find direct parallels to being an oppressed minority surrounded by people who are against you. It's easy, the sayings and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad. You could almost call it central to the Islamic message.

By Red and Kareem's suggestion, Islam offers central insight into dealing with discrimination and hate from broader society; however, Kareem suggests that the connection between Islam and subordinated groups is deeper than vague direction. He goes so far as to say that bearing discrimination is central to the Islamic message. Accounts such as these suggest that—at least conceptually—religious Muslims lean into identities formed around religious boundaries to address or make sense of dominant racial framing.

Many participants articulated the importance of showing dominant group members what Islam taught and consequently what Muslims were really like. This transparency included taking opportunities to openly denounce terror, engaging in

dialogue with those around them, and participating in events sanctioned by religious organizations aimed at engaging dominant group members. Here, Zain shares about the importance of combatting anti-Islamic stigma:

My understanding is that people of other backgrounds and other faiths don't get it [understand the difference between Islam and Terror] the same way, so it is important to us to denounce those acts. In some ways doing it over and over again does get old, [ . . . ] but then I think, "if it furthers understanding for people, then why not do it."

Zain believes that if religious Muslims do not denounce terror and distinguish between extremism and a more orthodox Islam, then no one else will. In another instance, cited below, he discusses the importance of doing public service with a Muslim religious organization:

Whenever something like this happens I think it just gives us more of a reason to do more projects that promote compassion and understanding. Our [religious organization's] mission is compassion and understanding, so we just, you know, any sort of negativity serves as fuel for us to combat it and put more positivity into the world. So, that's, I guess that's how it affects me personally.

Several men discussed the ways that they participated in Muslim religious organizations' programming aimed at engaging dominant group members. This involvement included open houses at Mosques, service in the local community, and public engagement in spaces such as state fairs or churches. The fact that men combatted stigma in religious spaces is especially noteworthy, because doing so intentionally builds a response to discrimination around organized religion and religious identities. Again, participants are not simply seeking to avoid personal stigmatization and discrimination. Rather, men seek to construct authentic Muslim identities that combat the racialized trope of "terrorist."

## *DISCUSSION*

I find the boundary-work framework, as recently applied to Latinx immigrants, to yield themes that are potentially transferable to the experiences of religious Muslims in America. Literature has demonstrated that, like Latinx immigrants, Muslims are racialized as threats to U.S. national security (Romero and Zarrugh 2018; Zopf 2018). This dominant racial framing has been used to justify stigmatization, political action, and violence against social actors presumed to be associated with terror. What this study offers is a glimpse into the response of individuals to this racialization.

That Muslim-sounding-names were discussed so frequently by participants suggests the importance of names as a stigma symbol that must be managed by Muslim men; however, confirming this assumption will require further research into the experiences of populations that have been racialized as Muslims but may be non-religious. This study offers a glimpse into what may be a broader trend among religious Muslims, or even non-religious Muslims, or in different locales. Furthermore, greater research is needed to confirm whether name-changing is so highly contested and discussed because it is a common occurrence, names are a central component of identity, it is a topic of explicit religious instruction, or due to some other cause.

What this study more definitively offers is an analysis of boundary negotiations carried out by religious Muslim men working toward racial authenticity. Based on my findings, it appears that Muslim men in this locale construct authentic Muslim-selves with which they proudly present their religious identities to combat derogatory framing of Islam. More specifically, they construct and present these authentic selves, at least in part, by choosing not to change their names. This is so despite the fact that many of the men that I interviewed reported that they could pass as non-Muslims. I find that a hierarchy in the desirability of strategies for managing stigma exists among the men in this sample. These Muslim-American men are susceptible to discrimination and subordination based on their religious identities even though they experience differential and relative privileges as men. Rather than concealing these identities or “passing” as non-Muslim-Americans to detract from potentially stigmatizing attributes, these men typically present their religious identities more openly. Whereas stigma management literature to date focuses on differing methodologies of stigma management, I suggest that this framework should be connected to literature on intersectionality, racialization, and boundaries. Micro-level analysis of how stigma is managed by subordinated group members may yield insight into how highly-scrutinized racial identities are formed, thus revealing micro-level interactional responses to dominant racial framing.

For the Muslim men interviewed for this study, managing racialized religious identities presents unique crises because of the personal and religious importance that these identities hold. Statements such as, “I think he may have assimilated *too much*” (emphasis mine) and “that’s a degree of *selling out* in my mind” (emphasis mine) reflect that presentations which downplay or outright conceal racialized religious identities are perceived to be contrary to presenting an authentic Muslim identity. The desirability of presenting a reclaimed positive Muslim identity for religious men creates a thin margin of religiously authentic racial presentation whereby, at least as these men suggest, religious Muslim men should re-articulate the negatively stigmatized Muslim category as a positive one.

## CONCLUSION

In the face of widespread Islamophobia, literature that focuses on the experiences of individuals racialized as Muslim is becoming increasingly important. The findings of this study are important because they offer insight into (1) how racism impacts religious Muslims, (2) the micro-level response of religious Muslims to broad-based racialization and discrimination, (3) how these micro-level negotiations contribute to the development of identity around racialized categories, and (4) how groups can combat racism by using boundaries. As I have shown, the men in this study appear to create meaning around religious identities in response to racism. If these trends are more broadly applicable, scholars of race and identity should study how boundaries are brokered around Muslim religious identities to investigate how subordinated racial identities may be constructed in response to dominant racial framing.

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