

Reluctant Pluralists: Western Muslims and Essentialist Identity Structures

The issue of identity construction among young Western Muslims of migrant origin has drawn a significant amount of attention for many reasons. They represent a fascinating case study of the intermingling of distinct ethno-cultural, religious and national senses of belonging—each complicated and strengthened by ever-intimate and immediate tools of globalized communication. Western Muslims also represent the fastest growing population sector in many of their respective countries—numbering more than 58 million people in Europe by 2030¹—which has galvanized debates about welfare consumption, employment, and citizenship. Moreover, the private construction of Western Muslim identity has been publicized significantly by corresponding political identities and their scrutiny by government policymakers and the press. Threaded through each of these considerations is interest (or concern) about the purported conflict between Muslims’ paramount allegiance to their faith and their consensual obligation to their state (See Mandaville 2001; Bowen 2004). The question is how can we explain Western Muslim identities?

Examining the whirlwind of analysis, there appears to be an emerging consensus amongst scholars of social and political identity that Western Muslims live out an anti-essentialist critique of identity construction every day of their lives. (For examples, see Grillo 2003; Strasser 2008; Salih 2004; Liebkind 1989.) Indeed, in their quotidian choices, Western Muslims selectively negotiate a variety of obligations and

¹ According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2011), the number of Muslims in Europe has grown from 29.6 million in 1990 to 44.1 million in 2010. While Europe’s Muslim population is projected to exceed 58 million by 2030, Muslims today account for about 6% of Europe’s total population, up from 4.1% in 1990 (Ibid). Most European Muslims are expected to live in Eastern Europe, but some of the biggest increases in Europe’s Muslim population in absolute numbers over the next 20 years are expected to occur in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany and other countries in Western, Northern and Southern Europe (Ibid).

lifestyles to formulate a constellation of unique identities that—from the outside—appear to select from different spheres of belonging simultaneously. Subsequently, various scholars have heralded a generation of young Muslims ‘striving to resist hegemonic attempts to reduce their identities to essentialised ideological entities, and seeking to destabilise these hegemonic representations’ (Salih 2004: 996). It is thought that Western Muslims do this by—for example—adhering to certain aspects of Islam, specific ideals of national belonging, and unique traditions of homeland culture to assemble an amalgamated identity that defies the discourses of complete religious, national, or ethnic ‘authenticity.’

This argument connects with a variety of recent work by scholars arguing for a postmodernist approach to identity construction. Informed by societies defined by greater individual choice and less normative guidance, this approach emphasizes the incoherence and de-centered structure of identification processes that limit individual agency in the process of self-definition (See Rattansi and Phoenix 1997; Bauman 2001). With new capacity for action and self-definition, Hall writes that the suppressed minorities are obligated and able to confront their pasts, recover exiled cultures, rediscover social roles, and subjectively recast their identities (Hall 1991: 39). The self is thereby viewed as ‘constructed’—in the modernist sense that it is not organic, but also in the postmodernist sense that it is interminably under renovation. As populations become increasingly dispersed, the conception of ‘origin’ or ‘belonging’ becomes increasingly subject to interpretation. And as ethnicities are exposed to more influences, the clarity of that ethnicity is obscured to the extent that identity is less inherited and more self-determined. In line with such trends, Hall argues that identity should be viewed as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, of representation (Hall 1990: 222; Hall 1996: 2).

Much of the research highlighting the anti-hegemonic nature of Western Muslims' identities has remained at the conceptual level, and the available empirical work has tended to solicit the perspectives of elites. However, as postmodernists observe, identity construction is increasingly an individualized pursuit that arguably submits to fewer authorities and may consider a wider, more nuanced range of available spheres of belonging. For this reason, in examining the purported anti-essentialism of Western Muslim identity construction, I have focused specifically on the perspectives of young, working class, British Bangladeshi and Spanish Moroccan adult subjects immersed in their chosen context—on street corners, youth clubs, living rooms, mosques, fast food shops, and football fields—in order to solicit the subjectivities of their social and political self-image.

While collected data indeed re-affirms British and Spanish Muslims' concomitant relationships to a variety of identity paradigms, interview content demonstrates that subjects' multiplicity is complicated by their desire to *meet*—not reject—the essentialist standards of belonging to identity paradigms discursively available to them. Rather than defiantly cherry-picking preferred characteristics of religion, ethnicity and nationality—as it indeed appears to the outsider—individual responses suggest that the young Muslim men interviewed are trying to fulfill perceived standards of authenticity. In short, the British and Spanish Muslims interviewed often expressed an implicit desire to be “everything to everyone.”

Such a contention helps explain the prevalence of young Muslims' expressed and well-documented 'identity crisis.' Indeed, individuals that are disinterested in accommodating the essentialist identity components of religion, ethnicity or nationality would not feel a sense of crisis if they are deemed to be inauthentic by their peers. Instead, it is precisely an internal desire to fulfill the perceived standards of authenticity which underpins individuals' senses of self and collective belonging. From interview

content, this appears true despite the constructed nature of essentialist ideals and participants' successful daily negotiation of these competing allegiances. In what psychologists term *polyphasia*, young British and Spanish Muslims thereby wish to shift from one competing identity to the next depending on different contexts, without losing the strength of their connection to one identity vis-à-vis the other. They are the most reluctant of pluralists.

While this argument reconsiders our approach to and understanding of Muslim political identity formation, it also raises questions about the postmodern conception about identification as it pertains to the young Muslim men interviewed. Indeed, the evidence suggests that multiplicity is not necessarily a rebuff of the essentialist cultural structures that postmodernists dismiss, but may be a separate simultaneous embrace of different (and perhaps awkwardly conflicting) essentialisms. In this way, an example like "British Muslims" should be thought of as striving to be quintessentially British *and* quintessentially Muslim—meeting the perceived standards of one community without mitigating the authenticity of their belonging to the other.

In this article, I will substantiate this proposal with interview content and observations from qualitative case studies of young Bangladeshi men from London's East End and young Moroccan men from the southern barrios of Madrid. I will begin with a brief overview of the methods and background of the two case studies. I will then consider how different theories of identity formation understand the role and impact of essentialisms. This review raises three principle questions: (1) Do individuals actually disappear from the process of identity formation in post-modernity? (2) Amidst the multiplicity, are identities fragmented or coherent? And (3) what is the role of social contexts which both depend on essentialist representations and force them to compete against one another? I will address these queries with reference to prominent literature and subjects' relationships with their Islamic faith and national identity. I will

conclude by discussing the implications of my ideas about young British and Spanish Muslims' perceptions about essentialist identity paradigms.

Background to the Cases

Methods

The study of essentialisms and contemporary identity formation requires sensitivity to surrounding social contexts and the variability of their subjective interpretation.

Qualitative interviews and immersion in the communities of interest enable the researcher to consider both situated experiences and objectively observable behavior (See discussion of this in Côté 2006). Equally importantly, they illuminate the continuous interactional processes that intermingle context with individual psychologies in natural settings. Under circumstances when certain personal choices were neither behaviorally observable nor measurable, probing follow-up questions and passive observation allowed me to investigate the rationalization of respondents' senses of affinity.

Furthermore, identity formation is a process (Hermans, 2001; Grotevant, 1987; Kroger 1993). So it is therefore important to use investigative methods that examine individuals' deliberative considerations as they make quotidian choices in real time. As Schachter writes, 'In listening to individuals' descriptions of their deliberations and choices regarding identity, it is possible to fathom how they understood the relationships among their different identifications and how they consciously and unconsciously attempted to transform or redefine these relationships in order to create a more coherent identity' (2004: 171). Labs are simply less sensitive to social contexts and the power inequities therein. So at the expense of generalizability, it was anticipated that qualitative interviews would render a more meticulous comprehension of sociopolitical behavior and ideation that would inform my hypotheses.

Migrant-origin, second generation European Muslims evoke many key themes in identity theory and, for the purposes of this study, are subject to a variety of powerful essentialisms. Despite Muslims' remarkable ethnic, national and sectarian heterogeneity, they have been classified generically by their supranational religious affiliation. However, the subject position 'Muslim' has also allowed many European Muslims to simplify troubling aspects of their nationality or ethnicity (Valentine and Sporton, 2009: 744). Despite lamenting the problems with essentialisms, Grillo (2003) writes that 'for some people (outsiders, insiders, Muslims, non-Muslims) a person's essence is captured by their religion. Though it is important not to essentialise 'Muslim', we must understand that essentialising is a social fact which analysis must take into account and explain' (2004: 864). And in practice, the classification 'Muslim' and its suggested essentialisms have not only been wielded by governments and non-adherents, but also by Muslims themselves in equally instrumentalist fashion. Recently, this has been as true for those seeking to vilify Islam as it has been for those attempting to defend and reclaim Islam.

This study was based on two case studies of European Muslims—Bangladeshis in London's East End and Moroccans in southern Madrid. All participants were between 18- and 30-years old, and are citizens or will shortly be eligible for citizenship in their countries of residence. All have resided nearly the entirety of their lives in Britain or Spain. Subjects were encountered in their local neighborhoods, granted full anonymity, and examined using in-depth interviews. Part of a larger study on European Muslim political behavior and identity construction, these communities were selected for their contrasting sociopolitical identities, despite similar social positioning and similar systems of national government. Cognizant of differences in citizenship policy

and migration histories, I interviewed about 100 total subjects—60 in the target group along with a remainder of community leaders and elders to provide context.²

London's East End

Since their 1970s arrival in the East End, Bangladeshis have slowly emerged to define the contemporary East End's civic and cultural life—seizing the baton from antecedent communities of Eastern European Jews, Irish Catholics, and Francophone Huguenots as the newest migrant community of London's historically working class borough. Like their migrant predecessors, earlier generations of Bangladeshis encountered the racism and violence of white East Enders wary of an inscrutable Other (Eade, 1994; Eade and Garbin, 2002; Kerchen, 2005).

However, thanks to their effervescent civic activism, the United Kingdom's rather open citizenship laws, and historically thin definitions of Britishness, the newest generation of Bangladeshi adults is characterized by their fluency with British life, culture and politics. Attracted to the materialistic excesses of Western prosperity, many young Bangladeshis exhibit a fondness for chic clothes, fast cars, and sparkling jewelry. Hollywood, Bollywood, the “bling” culture of hip hop are omnipresent influences that pepper young people's aspirations for the affluence and airbrushed

² As all the subjects and topics were examined in the present (even if informed by experiences or influences from the past), the materials for the two case studies were synchronous (though not simultaneous) and considered in the continuous eight-month period—first in London, then Madrid. Regardless of the venue, participants were notified that I was present for the purpose of research and observation. Before each interview, participants were reminded of this and explained that all statements would remain unattributed to them. All names used in the study are aliases. The structure of interviews was kept consistent across units, and across venues, to produce two congruent examinations. Repetition of questions was followed to ensure the reliability of the procedure. That said, questions were asked in variable sequences and fashions, tailored to the respondent's interests, insecurities, and capacities. This fostered the most outwardly casual approach, and permitted further inquiry about certain fruitful threads of discussion. Though I had initial concerns about respondents' concern for social desirability, my external relationship to the examined communities seemed to render respondents a sense of greater anonymity. Indeed, several said they were able to be more candid because they knew there would be no internal social or moral judgment about their responses, and they were confident that their responses had no chance of being repeated to family or other community members. Observation was made possible by full immersion into both communities on a daily basis.

contentment they read about and see on television and in cinemas. Today's young adults subsequently possess a fervent sense of entitlement about the rights, liberties, and opportunities which they expect the British social system to afford them. Such expectations have frequently been disappointed by a competitive economy, but also by the realities of casual discrimination and the recent scrutiny of government security policies that have fingered British Muslims as suspected extremists, impugning the Islamic faith for the actions of a handful of adherents.

This political environment has complicated patterns of British Bangaldeshis' identity construction. Just about every second generation British Bangladeshi interviewed is grappling with some degree of what participants almost universally refer to as an 'identity crisis.' This crisis is created by young people's confusion about the definitions of and their sense of judgment about three main sources of identification: their British nationality and surroundings, their Bangladeshi ethnicity and culture of kinship, and their increasingly deterritorialized Islamic religion. 'Sometimes I say I have five faces,' says Tayyib. 'Some friends think I'm religious. Some friends I go clubbing with. Some friends I talk politics with. Some friends I do community work with. And then I'm different with my family.' One community elder who works with young people says, 'I see them all as zombies. They are juggling their faith, cultural ties, and attention to modernity in the West all at once. Depending where they are, they are different people.' The so-called identity crisis entails many individuals' simultaneously questioning their own nationality, culture or religion—each seeming to overlap and undermine the other.

Lavapiés and Southern Madrid

The southern barrios of Madrid begin once the city's dramatic plazas, grand promenades, and calculated urban planning deteriorate into the narrow, sloping

passageways and crooked corridors of Lavapiés—the central city’s low-rent immigrant *barrio*. In the immediate aftermath of the March 11th, 2004 train bombings, several young Moroccan, Algerian and Syrian suspects were arrested in the corridors of Tribulete Street in Lavapiés, where the mobile phones that detonated the bombs were purchased. And ultimately, 18 of the 26 men identified by police as participants in the attacks at the time were Moroccan, most from Tangiers and the neighboring former colonial outpost of Tetuán (Briscoe, 2008). Since then, a bolstered presence of police officers who patrol the plazas and alleys by car, moto, and horseback interrogate people regularly, demanding immigration and identification papers. ‘The 11 March bombs really changed things a lot,’ says Majid. ‘And it was by Moroccans. We really just [screwed] ourselves. The behavior of Spaniards changed. When you’re in the streets, they treat you differently, they look at you differently.’ Increasingly securitized, the Moroccan community is steadily moving to the peripheries of Madrileña society. Neighborhoods of Moroccans are gradually growing in the southern, working class *barrios* of Villaverde, Rivas, Fuenlabrada, Getafe, Móstoles and Leganés, a region generally referred to as Madrid Sur (D’Ocon, 2004; García, 2004).

Unlike their British Bangladeshi counterparts, Spanish Moroccans have encountered a convoluted path to citizenship in Spain. Since the 1980s, Spanish migration policy has been cobbled together without a clarified idea of citizenship. Moroccans have been subjected to legislative double standards that require ten years of employed legal residence to qualify for naturalization, while other migrant communities like Latin Americans must be contracted for two years for eligibility. A significant proportion of Moroccans were naturalized by virtue of the government’s five arbitrary regularizations that rendered undocumented workers amnesty over the past 25 years.

Even without very much institutional or symbolic acknowledgement of their growing presence in Spain, Moroccans have nevertheless adapted. Unlike British Bangladeshis, this has been a largely passive process of consuming available cultural goods and following certain local customs. Still, many Moroccans interviewed—even some of those born in Spain—maintain a lingering myth of return to Morocco. Many young Moroccans interviewed do not believe that Spanishness occupies *any* part of their identity, that they have no stake in the future of Spain, and that the norms of Catholic Spain and Islamic Morocco are utterly irreconcilable. Several participants believe that a person is, quite simply, one or the other—culturally and civically. Given these disparate constructions of European Muslim identities, the following sections will examine subjects' concurrent relationships with national, ethno-cultural, and religious spheres of belonging.

Identity Theory and Essentialisms

Much of identity theory has centered on the roles that individuals play and make. The self is generally thought to be a dynamic construct that negotiates individual behavior given ambient social structures and circumstances. This behavior is informed by the internalization and interpretation of contextual norms, discursive stereotypes and paragons of identity that the individual may then emulate, rebuff or somehow integrate. In any case, identity theory, even while revealing the constructed nature and incoherence of essentialisms, acknowledges that individual choices are ultimately impacted by them (See Hogg, et al. 1995: 256-262). This section will first review Western Muslims' relationship with such identity essentialisms, and then consider modernist and postmodernist approaches to explaining it.

Social discourse about Muslims and Islam has been dominated by the promulgation of images portraying a irreconcilably foreign and illiberal group of young

men and suppressed women to characterize a religion that is arguably more heterogeneous than any other. Such imagery has been, to a large extent, the product of reactionary efforts to construct and root simplistic essentialisms amidst—and also *because of*—the perception that Islam is competing with national identities. Migrant-origin Muslims’ reconstruction of homeland norms has spurred native communities to reflect on the character of indigenous identity so that it may be defined against the difference by which they are suddenly confronted. In this way, not only have these national identities been dis-embedded; Like Muslim identities, they too have been re-invented, some involving nostalgic efforts at recovery—exemplified in ‘heritage’ projects—which attempt to shore up the unstable, shifting grounds of identity formation (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997: 99-100).

Indeed, the growing population of European Muslims has forced governments and societies to reconsider what it means to be British, French or Spanish, as more and more different people seek nationality. Citizenship tests and other related qualifications for naturalization are meant to enforce newcomers’ conformation to the particularisms of national identity. As Christian Joppke has observed, these national particularisms, which immigrants and ethnic minorities are asked to accept across European states, are but local versions of the universalistic idiom of liberal democracy (2008: 541). While this is hardly particular, Joppke notes that it is often sufficient to exclude the West’s purported Other. ‘Especially with respect to Muslims,’ he writes, ‘particular universalism is the main form in which Western states practice exclusion today’ (Ibid).

Indeed, in characterizing their national identity, European states have been most adept at defining that which they are not. Consequently, the past decade has witnessed the re-creation of ‘Britishness’, ‘*Hispanidad*’, and ‘*fraternité*’—enshrining essentialist conceptions of the national into public policy. Recent rules that ban the *burqa* (Islamic gown), establish British “values,” or prohibit the construction of minarets have each

played on the need to adhere to a particularist liberalism that has often been every bit as constructed, exclusive and fundamentalist as the Islamic extremism from which it seeks to differentiate itself. Howarth (2002) has persuasively exhibited how individuals develop an understanding of their social context and of their relationship to it through the eyes of others. For this reason, it is worth considering the impact of and response to such ubiquitous essentialisms, as they pervade identity formation in Europe and abroad.

Modernist and Postmodernist Approaches

Modernist conceptions of personal identity reflect the underpinning logic of essentialism. The works of Erikson (1963, 1968) and subsequently Marcia (1980) argue that the solidification of a secure sense of self represents the achievement of adult maturity. This sense of self features an integrity and continuity that align the individual identity with social context in such a way that the individual is then generally unaffected by the surrounding world. Accordingly, Eriksonian modernism is characterized by (1) individual agency; (2) sameness and continuity over time and context; (3) coherency as the resolution of adolescent conflict and introspective exploration; and (4) the assigned virtue of identity security as the achievement of psychological development. Schachter (2005: 169) notes that while Erikson was deeply aware of the social aspect of personal identity formation, he stressed that a relatively coherent and integrated identity was the individual's psychological need as well as society's need.

Despite the contested nature of such ideas in social science, modernist conceptualizations of identity have powerfully informed the way societies discursively portray personal and collective identity. Indeed, modernist perspectives lend themselves to existing social propensities to construct "typical" identities, whether for ease of reference or for social mapping. However, the continuity and coherence of the

modernist interpretation also contributes to the belief that certain identity ‘types’ possess a single set of essential characteristics, which supports simplistic reference, understanding, and social treatment.

Postmodernist approaches highlight the fluidity and fragmented nature of personal identities. Scholars like Rattansi and Phoenix (1997: 101) argue that modernist theories produce a strong individual/society dichotomy that obscures understanding ‘the complex ways in which identities are formed and operate dynamically in different social contexts. ...This glosses over the obvious contradiction between the naïve assumption of control and choice in ‘identity options’ and the fact that, as is the case with women and ethnic minorities, some identities are more ‘assigned’ than others and thus not open to choice (Grotevant 1992).’ In this way, the postmodernist approach contends that personal identities are largely imposed by social circumstances, and not simply the unfolding of an essential essence inherent in certain human beings regardless of specific institutions and cultures’ (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997: 104). For postmodernists, the content of identity constructions cannot be essential because they are (1) ‘de-centered’ from the individual who is not conscious of certain inclinations; (2) ‘relational’ to ambient circumstances; (3) multiple and ‘hybridized’ internally and in their perception by others; and (4) constantly in the process of being reconstructed (See Rattansi and Phoenix 1997; Bauman, 2001; Hall 1990, 1991; Giddens 1991).

Which of these theories best explains European Muslim identity construction? From this conceptual overview, a paradox emerges. Even as the process of identity construction is increasingly individualized by the contemporary shifting of hierarchies and boundaries of belonging, individuals continue to depend (perhaps increasingly) on essentialist organizations of personal identification to relate to one another. This means that essentialist divides are being simultaneously transcended and reproduced, often by the same individuals. Indeed, while individuals may objectively discard essentialisms

in new aggregations of personal identity, essentialisms appear prominently in the subjective way individuals understand third-party perceptions of them. In order to explain British and Spanish Muslims' negotiation of these circumstances and relate it to understandings of identity construction, we must first address three pending questions given the data from the cases:

1. Does European Muslim individual agency actually *disappear* from the process of identity formation in post-modernity?
2. Amidst the multiplicity, are European Muslim identities *fragmented* or *coherent*?
3. What is the role of European Muslim social contexts which both *depend* on essentialist representations and *undermine* them?

1) Individual Agency

The matter of individual agency in identity formation is complicated by the question of whether the individual has control over a process of personal identity construction that is powerfully affected by social contexts. This is especially salient because the experience of European Muslims suggests that agents are susceptible to the logic and convenience of coherent constructions. They accept and appeal to essentialisms, even while simultaneously defying their simplicity or irreconcilability.

Among British Bangladeshi interviewees in London's East End, their reinvigorated embrace of Islam appears to be a response to a securitized Western social environment that undermines their claims to national belonging (See Archer, 2001; Dwyer, et al, 2008). Islam is a way to respond, that also satisfies the desire of young adults' parents and other local community members to follow certain ethno-religious traditions. So even while many British Bangladeshis are separating themselves from the restrictions and anachronism of Bangladeshi culture, Islam serves a sufficient replacement for all involved.

New universalist forms of Islamic identification are unique products of the Muslim experience in the diaspora. Only once separated from acculturated forms of Islam may adherents achieve the critical distance necessary to re-interpret and re-imagine their faith in the context of their new situated existence. In the diaspora, Muslims encounter a multiplicity of linguistic, ecclesiastical, and cultural norms because there is no status quo to reference and settle matters of disputed propriety, authenticity or truth. This is what has been termed an absence of ‘social authority’ (Roy 2004), and it is partially due to the shortage of cultural and religious resources with which one may reconstruct acculturated forms of Islam. The ingredients that comprise custom, tradition, and universal interpretation are quite simply less accessible outside of the country of origin. This changes religious practice and standards—which become consolidated into competing poles of social authority, each of which independently strives for allegiance.

In this spirit, migration has been called a ‘theologizing’ experience—prompting reflection about central religious ideals—because of the ‘emotional consequences of uprooting and resettlement’ (Smith, 1978 in Byng, 2008). Living in the West thus facilitates the separation of the merely cultural from the genuinely Islamic and hence the ‘rediscovery’ of the ‘real essence’ of Islam (Scantlebury 1995; Jacobson 1997; Samad 1998 in Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002). For this reason, many adherents to this reinterpreted Western Islam approach their religion in the way of a convert, filled with references to “authenticity” and a regard for the sacred text as the only dependable source. In doing so, they subject themselves to a new essentialism that—despite its religious base—is just as constructed as national identity.

Given British Bangladeshis’ felt rejection by white peers, the idea of an identity that ignores borders and unifies like-minded people holds great relevance. ‘Islam simplifies,’ Mahir says. ‘It’s all about unification, and that’s what we’re getting away

from. I am a Muslim. Not a Barelwi, Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi, Hanafi or whatever. I'm a Muslim. I'm not British or Bengali. I'm Muslim.' Mahir's rejection reflects a common desire to move beyond differences to a universalist Islam that enables Muslims to transcend exclusive ties. Similarly, Ismail, a high school student, says, 'I don't feel an identity crisis, because I feel like I have a relationship with God and so I don't have any problem saying that I am a Muslim. I've put myself in a box, and eliminated my British and Bengali ties. Do I need to claim to be British? No, I don't need to. I have a British passport. And I've only been to Bangladesh once, when I was a child, and I was too young to remember any of it.' Such statements suggest that subjects are ultimately in control of their identity formation, that their selections were made consciously.

Like converts, British Bangladeshis' relationship with Islam therefore becomes chosen (and thus more closely defended) and rhetorical (and thus more unstable). Because it supplants a rhetorical national or ethnic identity which requires no exercises beyond discursive identification, Islam as an identity doesn't necessarily suggest practice or even accurate knowledge. 'Without Islam, I have no identity,' Ebrahim, a university student, says. 'My practice is weak, yeah. I have little time in life for Islam. But it's still my base. When I have nothing else, it'll always be there.' All participants who discussed their dabbling in the *haram* (Islamically prohibited) say that they will return to the 'right path' later in life. Islam is therefore an entity that—unlike Britishness and Bangladeshi culture—is perceived to be most flexible and enduring. It cannot be withheld because of third-party disapproval, nor is it evanescent with increasing time and distance. Indeed, Islam is perceived to be more subject to personal interpretation and agency than either British nationality or Bangladeshi heritage.

Responses here suggest the relevance of what modernists term 'identity structure.' Structural approaches address the manner by which individuals come to organize and construct their identity—defining how individuals receive, retain,

manipulate and evaluate their life experiences and social contexts (Kroger 2005: 202). For the more outwardly religious British Bangladeshis interviewed, even though they appeal to externally imposed expectations of their Islamic piety, individuals believe they consciously *choose* whether and how to integrate their faith into their identity. This is less true for those respondents who were less religious. Among Moroccan interviewees in Southern Madrid, there was a sense that they were discursively misrepresented, and subsequently expected to maintain certain roles not of their making. As a result, those participants who were quite assimilated into Spanish culture and looked upon Moroccan customs and norms as relics, identified with the very image they rebuff. Zahir, a 20-year-old from Fuenlabrada, was born and raised in Madrid:

I don't feel Moroccan or Spanish. I'm somewhere in the middle. But I'm mostly Moroccan. Moroccans are more closed. They are in another century. They're very traditional. You can't go out at night, you can't have sex before marriage, you can't wear short clothes. I don't feel obligated. I was taught things, but you take the path you want. That's what my parents taught me, but Islam is more strict. In the future, I will also be a strict practitioner of Islam. And I'm certain that my wife will be Islamic. My ideal is to find a Spanish woman and convert her.

Reading his statements in other parts of the interview contextualize this reluctance to embrace the Islamic aspect of his Moroccan identity:

The image of Islam in Spain is that it is closed. That women are dominated. They have reason. It is closed. Women are undervalued. They're supposed to have kids and no more. I've lived in Spain a long time and I've been influenced by the society here. I think we need to integrate. If we were in an Arab country, it would be fine. Our values are not incorrect objectively. They're just incorrect for living in Spain...

I go out in Madrid. But there are a lot of places there that won't let me in because I'm Moroccan. It's because the real Moroccans, the ones who recently immigrated, get into a lot of trouble. They fight, they cause problems.

The racism affects me because all of my friends are Spanish and I get singled out. And you know, they joke around about it. I don't hang out with Moroccans. The Moroccans often make fun of me too for being Spanish. You know, things like, 'He's a shit Spaniard?' My old group of Moroccan friends dissolved because they didn't want to stay together. They had problems expressing themselves to Spaniards, like a lot of Moroccan people. They can't explain themselves and why they left Morocco, so they often get aggressive.

Zahir's statements suggest that the labels most germane to his identity have been externally defined in a way that is not reflective of his interpretation. He refers to 'real

Moroccans' as if he is not, and demonstrates some confusion about the contextual contingencies of Islam. He wishes to find a 'Spanish wife' but convert her (almost metaphorically) to his way of life. Clearly, Zahir's attempts to have it both ways have proven futile. He is Islamic simply because he is Moroccan, but not necessarily because he wants to be. He feels the pairing is socially forced upon him.

Objectively observed, subjects' variable dabbling in Islamic religiosity and local norms suggests that they select germane attributes of multiple identity constructions to which they are exposed in the informational flow of daily life. In the process, they may be observed to individually construct self-styled identities composed of incomplete paragons—disparate fragments welded together. But subjectively interpreted, subjects explain lifestyle choices as deliberate attempts to adhere to selected essentialisms of personal import, or as authentic reflections of innate and therefore immutable identity forms. In this way, each assumes control over the integration of diverse attributes. They think of their identity as multiple, but also complete.

2) Fragmentation and Coherency

Questions of fragmentation and coherency seem to be in the eye of the beholder.

Modernists claim that individuals choose among disparate identity elements or integrate them into a structure characterized by sameness and continuity.

Postmodernists contend that such elements are never integrated in any universal way, and that fragmentation should be anyway accepted as part of a more adaptive

personality (Schachter, 2005: 381). To reconcile these positions, Schachter (2004)

proposes the concept of 'identity configurations' in which individuals adopt different identifications that exist separately side-by-side as 'confederated' attributes of the self.

However, the problem of perspective persists: Who determines whether an identity

construction is fragmented? The observer who is removed from individual decisionmaking, or the individual who is blind to the potentially ‘mixed and borrowed’ nature of his or her identity? According to a majority of respondents, their identities are positively coherent.

British Bangladeshis appealed to their embattled Islamic faith as a source of coherence. Irrelevant to individuals’ depth of practice or knowledge, Islamic identity simplifies the divisive networks of Muslim sects and ethnic groups that compete for power, and enables some degree of felt unity against their collective vilification in the West. ‘Up against violence, drugs, poverty, and bad housing, what holds this community together is religion,’ says Tayyib. ‘Everyone has been told the difference between *halal* and *haram* (permitted and prohibited). Those boundaries are always there. And the sense of brotherhood encourages help and feelings of solidarity.’ Islam also provides an unequivocal answer to young people’s identity crisis. Omar, an unemployed former gang member in Tredegar, said:

Things in my life were rough—family issues, girls, school, money—everything. So I turned to Islam, began reading several books. I grew out my beard to emulate the Prophet, which makes me look older, forcing people to take me more seriously. ...The Quran is my way of life. ...I don’t need counsel because I can always look at the book. Everything I need is here. I don’t adapt the Quran to British citizenship. British citizenship is adapted to the Quran.

Some respondents described their embrace of Islam as a reaction against their rejected Britishness, which can thereby be criticized as an impious identity that submits to temptation and vice. Many participants fingered the creeping influence of contemporary ‘Western culture’ and its malicious allure as the primary impediment to a more Islamic life. The temptation of mixed gender relations, alcohol, drugs, music, secularism and individualism was regularly blamed for the perceived deterioration of moral values among Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets and the waning ethno-civic solidarity within the community. ‘We are so bloody gullible,’ says Calim, a 25-year-old schoolteacher from Stepney. ‘Look at the kids with the low, baggy trousers. They’ll

follow anything. And as the generations go by, they're getting spoiled and they're throwing it all away... The situation has gotten so bad, and it's going to get worse and worse. The hip hop culture is so damaging. These kids live for that life of guns, drugs, cash...' In this way, the essentialist Islamic identity is fostered in response to the challenge of asserting British belonging.

Indeed by providing a transethnic source of community to supplant the problematic local, the *ummah* (global Muslim fellowship) facilitates claims to collective pride, loyalty, but also collective injury. And like a culture, followers of an Islamic identity tend to apply Islamic teachings as a complete way of life—as opposed to the way some of their parents have treated Islam, as a set of rituals to perform and repeat. However, this becomes problematic for many young people in Tower Hamlets because religious teachings and norms often clash with other more-embedded aspects of their British identity. 'Religion clashes with the style of the subculture,' Ridwan says. 'I feel bad if I go to mosque when I style up my hair, so I wear a hat. I feel weird, self-conscious when I wear my ripped jeans.' Other youths are perplexed by the competing priorities of a demanding faith and demanding career ambitions. 'I'm busy,' says Faisal, 'but Islam says that Islam is always first.' Shahid asks, 'How can we stick close to the text, and yet stay in the modern world?...I mean, if I had a job interview, I wouldn't be wearing [a prayer gown and a cap]. A hijab similarly doesn't go in our society. We are living in the West. It's about conforming to local society.' Islam is thus employed by those who feel rejected by the essentialist British nationality as an essentialist replacement, and by those who hope to be recognized as British as an equally authentic identity that must coexist. In both cases, very few adherents viewed their faith as something that could be followed incoherently.

For Spanish Moroccans, just as Spanishness entails Catholicism, pork and premarital sex, their enduringly Moroccan identity entails Islamic faith, Arabic

ethnicity, a *halal* diet and lifestyle, and one side of the age-old conflict across Gibraltar. According to participants, these elements are simply inseparable into a *la carte* options. Consequently, while many British Muslims feel the need to embrace their Islamic faith more closely in light of their integration into a post-Christian secular British society, such an ‘embrace’ would be redundant for Moroccans in Spain. While many British participants in London’s East End only felt as Islamic as the last time they prayed—those British Bangladeshis who had lapsed spoke of Islam with shame or regret—this was rarely the case with Moroccan participants. As Moroccans, they are quite naturally Muslim, and feel little need to re-assert this or ‘prove’ it. Mahmud is 20-years-old and has not returned to Morocco since his parents moved to Madrid 10 years ago:

My mother says, ‘Pray, pray.’ But I say that I will when I’m ready. Right now, I don’t have the time. You aren’t a Muslim because your parents tell you to be, or because you’re scared of God. You’re a Muslim because you feel it in your heart. It has to be there [gesturing inward].

In this way, Islam is learned to be an inextricable, built-in part of being ethnically and holistically Moroccan. So even though many respondents consumed Spanish cultural goods and assumed Spanish cultural habits, their Moroccan self-image endured.

From this examination, we see that essentialisms (and their subjective fulfillment) frequently provide the framework of individuals’ sense of coherency—confederate or otherwise. Interestingly, appeals to the requirements of an essentialist Islam or an essentialist Moroccan identity are regularly counterbalanced by engagement with British and Spanish cultural life—much of which is otherwise thought to be inconsistent with Islamic faith. However, individuals differ in their subjective perception of the tension between mainstream and ethnic cultures (Benet-Martínez, 2002: 493). For Schachter, such inconsistencies suggest an objectively observable

‘loose identity structure’ that features an inner logic of its own and possibly a different developmental trajectory (Schachter 2005: 390).

The source of this inner logic is explicated to an extent by Hermans’ concept of the ‘dialogical self’, which combines continuity and discontinuity (2001). He explains that there is a continuity within the individual’s relationship to diverse identity elements and essentialisms. However, there is a discontinuity between the same characters as far as they represent different, incomplete, and perhaps opposed voices in the spatial realm of the self (Hermans 2001: 248). Hermans argues that the dialogical self is ‘social’ in the sense that other people occupy different positions in a multi-voiced self, which therefore considers the perspectives of others outside the self while expressing the individual’s identity. More plainly, internal and external positions receive their significance as emerging from their mutual transactions over time (Hermans: 252). Because these opposing entities are subject to situated power differences, the voices of some groups are more prominent than others (Hermans: 263). In the case of European Muslims, their capacity to speak as Britons and Spaniards is mitigated by social forces. So they may more powerfully assume their Islamic identity, even while quietly maintaining the voice of their British and Spanish countrymen. This suggests that the negotiation of identity is subject to context.

3) Social Context

Given the inner logic of the dialogical self, individuals appear to have access to multiple systems of ideas, values, and knowledge, and are able to shift from one network to the next. The work of Veronica Benet-Martínez and her collaborators suggests that such shifts depend on social context. They argue that ‘individuals can possess dual cultural identities and engage in active cultural frame switching, in which they move between different cultural meaning systems in response to situational cues’

(Benet-Martínez et al. 2002: 493). These exogenous cues may be matters of generational status, linguistic assimilation, sociopolitical climate (Ibid.) or per Howarth, third person understandings of the one's identity attributes. The latter appears to be particularly poignant to the identity construction of British Bangladeshis and Spanish Moroccans who feel substantially estranged from their state of residency and citizenship.

On paper, British Bangladeshis conduct quintessentially British existences. Nearly all the subjects in the East End were born in the United Kingdom, attend or have attended British schools, and have absorbed years of British television, music and cultural media content. English is their best and usually only language, as many speak very broken *Sylheti*, and little to no Arabic. They survive on a diet of curry when at home and halal fried chicken and chips on the streets. 'I do want to feel British,' says Ridwan, 'because then I'm not isolated. I don't want people to say that just because I'm Asian or Muslim, I'm not British.' Similarly, Shahid says, 'I don't see myself as someone from outside this society. I'm British, and I am a product of this place.'

However, a majority of respondents say they feel definitively rejected by British society. 'When I have kids, they may not even speak Bengali,' Qadim says. 'But in the UK, I've been forced to think I'm different because of my skin color and the shade of beard I keep. Everything I have is for this country. But I'm not allowed to feel a part of it.' Naz, a 20-year-old university student from Stepney, asks:

What is British? Is it that I was born here? Or do I have to adopt the culture? Britain is multicultural. I know that. But there are certain things that I don't accept, that this society does. So people assume, 'Oh, he's not like us. He's radical.' All Muslims feel out of bounds. ...Where is multiculturalism if Britain is going to treat people differently, and not British? I've faced it. I've been told to go back to my country by an older white lady when I was playing football as a kid. Yes, my parents aren't English. But I was born here. I went to the same schools.

From news reports that cast South Asians and Muslims as dangerous, laws designed to profile them, personal and collective experiences with discrimination and racism, and

negative informal social interactions, young Bangladeshis have become intensely insecure about their role in British society.

Perceived political double standards particularly undermine personal claims to Britishness. For such reasons, Jalil, an unemployed gang member from Tredegar, said he doesn't feel like Bangladeshis are looked upon as equals, even if, personally, they feel as British as anyone else. 'I'm in the books as British,' he says, 'but if push comes to shove, it's a double standard, right? Look at Guantanamo Bay. If it were white Britons being tortured, they'd be out of there.' As a result, Bangladeshis quite generally are actively questioning their belonging and acceptance in the only country in which they hold citizenship—the only country they know. 'I feel like this is home,' said Zubair. 'This is my comfort zone. This is the system I grew up with. As a citizen I want to reap the benefits. The government provides me with a source of security. That said, just after 9/11, I once got stop-and-searched three times in a one hour and forty minute span, three minutes from my house. It made me feel very angry, undermined. I produced evidence that I'd been searched already, and the cops weren't having it.'

British disqualification was all the more poignant because British Bangladeshi subjects generally dismissed any significant connection to their Bangladeshi nationality. Bangladeshi customs like arranged marriage, restrictions on female behavior, clothing preferences, and certain ceremonies have been identified as part of an antiquated culture that has no place in modern British lives. Pnina Werbner explains that, 'By contrast to South Asian popular culture, which is inclusive, absorbent, experimental, reflexively satirical and politically incorrect, the South Asian Muslim diaspora in Britain is represented by spokesmen as socially exclusive, high cultural, puritanical, politicized and utterly serious' (Werbner, 2004). The second generation in Britain is very far removed from Bangladesh, and very few return with any frequency. In another conversation at a chicken and chips shop, I ask Zakaria to describe his ideal

world. He responds by suggesting that it would resemble ‘Bangladesh.’ After an awkward pause, he reconsiders, ‘Yeah but that’s not the right place either. They don’t really understand us. In Sylhet, everyone thinks of us as *Londoni*.’ Their accent in *Sylheti* is usually a ‘dead giveaway’—if the molded hair and baggy jeans are not.

Ultimately, a somewhat repressed desire to be recognized as British is what makes rejection of Bangladeshi participants’ Britishness subsequently affect them so strongly. Their sense of entitlement has been violated. Respondents clearly appealed to the liberal notion of *de jure* Britishness, but were consistently frustrated by the *de facto* ethno-cultural image of Britishness employed by countrymen who hold Bangladeshi’s brown skin and Islamic faith against them. Interestingly, claims of British authenticity were frequently substantiated with references to local acquaintance, the English language, and passports—the same attributes possessed by Spanish Moroccans who nevertheless perceive little belonging to Spain.

As opposed to their Bangladeshi counterparts’ interest in fulfilling the requirements of British nationality, the majority of Moroccan subjects believed that qualification as an authentic Spaniard was impossible—short of conversion to Catholicism. They perceived themselves to be essentially Moroccan, and therefore essentially not Spanish. Asked to identify certain lifestyle choices as typically “Spanish”, a significant number of participants selected only those choices which are distinctly prohibited by Islam. Spanish choices of music, sport, and or media content were never mentioned. Instead, the Spanish lifestyle was characterized by that which Islam is not. ‘For me,’ says Usman, ‘coexistence is about doing what you have to do to live peacefully with other people. It’s not a matter of integrating. I can’t eat pork or drink alcohol. I can’t go out to clubs and find girls. Those are rules. But going out to clubs, getting drunk and getting with women are *like* rules for young people here.’ Says Qasim, ‘Islam and Spanish society don’t go together. This is a Christian society, they

don't go to the mosque. They drink, they eat ham. Here, God is Jesus.' The perception is that in order to integrate or adopt an acceptable Spanish lifestyle, the Moroccan must break one set of rules and acquiesce to another. Says Walid:

A lot of Spaniards are racist, not just against Moroccans, all immigrants. To integrate with those types of people is difficult. We don't drink. We don't eat pork. We don't party. We don't go to dance clubs. Spaniards in my area, when they see an immigrant, they just start yelling at them on the street. ...People here are scared of some kind of re-conquest of Spain by Muslims. This is a centuries-old rift...

You have to be here for many years to learn and understand Spanish culture. And I finally have. But I'm Arab, I'm Muslim. I guess I feel like a Spanish Muslim. I don't really care if I'm accepted as a part of the society. My roots are still in Morocco. When the Moroccan national football team plays, I get really excited. When they play the national anthem before the match, the hairs on my arm stand up. I don't even know the words to the Spanish national anthem. Every religion has its rules and beliefs. I can't change my religion. And I won't change in order to integrate.

Such sentiments, widely echoed among study participants suggests that the Spanish civic identity is viewed as if it were a religious identity—rigid. Many participants plainly believe that Christianity is a presupposed characteristic of being *civically* Spanish, the way Christianity characterizes Spanish cultural identity.

According to interviews, a significant portion of second generation Moroccans already believes that gaining Spanish nationality would entail changing who they are, particularly religiously. 'I don't want nationality,' Gamal says. 'I'm not going to change. I'm Moroccan until I die. I want rights, but I don't want to change who I am. Nationality would change my religion. What if they turned me against my family? That's what might happen in my imagination.' Says Omar, 'There are a lot of Muslims with nationality. But I'm Moroccan and nothing more. I'm not going to take the flag here and cross myself. To feel Spanish would mean entering another religion. And if you don't change your religion, you won't be accepted by Spaniards. A Spaniard can be a Muslim. But a Muslim cannot be a Christian.' Similarly, Anwar says, 'I don't feel Spanish. It's the religion. They're of a different religion. I can't be a Spaniard. My

daughter isn't going to be a Spaniard either. She won't drink or bring home a boyfriend. That's not our identity.'

The inextricability of Islam from the Moroccan identity has only been reinforced by the discursive tendencies of members of Spanish society, who regularly refer to Moroccans as 'Muslims' and, more crudely, as *Moros*—a derogatory term that literally means *Moor*, the anachronistic classification of the Maghrebi existential foe and Other on the Iberian peninsula. Such discourse positions Islam within the individualist and privatizing framework of Spanish secularism, which converts Islam into a matter of personal belief or an integral product of family heritage—something more festive and cultural than it is spiritual or sacred. Referring to Moroccans as *Musulmanes* or *Moros* pairs Moroccan identity with Islam, and also reflects the non-neutral perception of the majority population that 'these people do not think or behave the same way as us.' As Moreras writes, today, the Spanish public sector employs the same deterministic charge once used in reference to cultural differences with Moroccans to justify a conflict with Muslims. This, he writes, is based on mistaken assumptions about the internal homogeneity of Moroccan collectives, and the centrality of culture (and now religion) in the construction of identities (Moreras, 2004). With such externally imposed and internally affirmed essentialisms, Islam is acquiring a greater public relevance among a group of people for whom religion was almost never the exclusive point of identity reference.

Perhaps most powerfully, the distinction between Spain and Morocco has been stitched into the histories of these two peoples. Ricard Zapata-Barrero derives the enduring enmity from Spain's 'permanent conflict' with Morocco, which has fostered the stereotype of 'the 'Moor' as somebody suspicious, physically dirty and pestilential, ugly and potentially criminal' (2006: 147). For over eight centuries (711 to 1492), the southern region of the Iberian peninsula was ruled by Muslim Arabs. Their expulsion

by the *Reyes Católicos* (Catholic Kings) Fernando and Isabela continues to be one of the most prominent images in Spanish history, but the subtle legacy of Moorish cultural influence has haunted Spanish traditions in art, architecture and language. Once Spain gained control of northern Morocco after the 1906 Conference of Aljeciras, Moroccans became the object of mockery, ‘simple savages.’ The northernmost regions of Morocco remained a Spanish Protectorate until 1956, when Spain surrendered much of the territory to the new Moroccan regime. It was during this era that the idea of *Hispanidad* (Spanishness) was developed to counterweigh the loss of the last colonies in the Americas during the Spanish-American War of 1898, and later recycled by the Franco regime to refer to a group of people linked according to linguistic and religious criteria—the two pillars of the Spanish discourse of exclusion. (Ibid.) Since the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Moroccans have been increasingly associated by their religion rather than their Moorish ethno-cultural heritage, as migration policies have begun to favor Latin Americans and Eastern Europeans. One Spanish government official was sensitive to this discourse:

What messages are we sending? Moroccans are thinking, ‘What am I?’ They’re not seen as Spanish or European. They’re Muslims. That’s the big worry. Before, in the newspapers, articles wrote about Algerians, Tunisians, Syrians, Moroccans, and Egyptians. Now they’re all just called Muslims. ‘A group of Muslims are entering the country.’ When Latin Americans arrive, they are not Catholics or Protestants. They’re Ecuadorians, Colombians, or Argentines. That is dangerous. [Why?] Because, if they’re Muslim, that means they’re not Spanish. Three generations later in France, they’re still called

Muslims, and not French. They are citizens! Spain is on the same path. And we are going to repeat the history of other countries.

Moroccans thus respond to the essentialism of Spanish identity constructs by adhering to a sense of Moroccan essentialism—nevertheless revealing a concern to *meet* the qualifications for their chosen identity, rather than defy them. This is hardly different from their Bangladeshi counterparts, who by and large desired to be recognized as authentically British rather than authentically Bangladeshi.

As the cases evince, different contexts constrain, enhance, interact with, and constitute developmental processes; Complementarily, individuals sometimes create, choose, maintain, change and constitute their contexts of development (Schachter 2005: 376). This calls for considering not how the individual deals with culture, but how the two make each other up (Schachter: 377). Pace modernist and postmodernist viewpoints, when neither the context nor the individual exclusively pre-determines identity, it can only be thought as co-constructed.

The Reluctant Pluralists

In both case studies, we see communities of young British and Spanish Muslim men who are interestingly both inclined toward the fulfillment of essentialist identity forms even as they pursue ostensibly pluralist lifestyles. In the East End, Bangladeshis interviewed exhibited a potent concern with following the most authentic brand of Islam, but also (and perhaps because of) a clear desire for full recognition as a Briton. In Madrid, Moroccans typically expressed a fatalistic perception that they would always remain essentially Moroccan, both in their self-reflection and their public image, no matter how much they adapted to Spanish society. Though both demonstrate the enduring relevance of essentialist identity structures to social and self-validation, the difference in manifestation can be attributed to the opposing worldviews of British Bangladeshis and Spanish Moroccans.

These different worldviews point to the salience of national citizenship regimes that construct certain conditions of national belonging. Such policies appear to be perceived by respondents as the most official of essentialisms—ones which are enforced by the requirements of naturalization. Indeed, in the process of restricting entry to the national society, citizenship tests, admission rules and national identity

discourse comprise the social context that pivotally impacts individuals' self-conceptions. This is neither to argue that native nationals endorse or even reflect such constructions, nor that minorities necessarily aim to satisfy their stipulations. If anything, citizenship tests seem to galvanize little more than superficial memorization of political and cultural trivia (and most of this study's subjects were citizens anyway). Instead, the findings of this study suggest that the nature of such policies appears to regulate the openness or restrictiveness of individuals' understandings of their belonging. In the East End, *de jure* acceptance as a British national perplexed individuals who felt rejected in actual social interactions. This led to the desire to assert their officially recognized belonging while also celebrating their (sometimes shakier) Islamic faith. In Lavapiés, conceptions of a more rigid Spanish identity led many Moroccan respondents to grasp their Moorish heritage more tightly—often ignoring their affinities for Spanish culture and life. In this way, respondents expressed a desire to meet the requirements of foreign belonging in response to their perceived disqualification from local belonging. In both cases, the concern to somehow 'qualify' was clear.

Postmodernist critiques would emphasize the observable incoherence of such British and Spanish Muslim identity constructions as an objective social reality. However, it seems clear that within the subjective minds of many of the individuals interviewed, they are adhering to paragons in self-perceived fulfillment of selected essentialisms—often multiple at once. Coherence is evidently a virtue, held by individuals engaged in the most profound of so-called identity 'crises'. Essentialist identity structures thereby demonstrate their power as simplifiers. They render subjects easy answers to complicated lifestyles and circumstances. They are often intertwined with political claims to represent or defend an embattled community. They render individuals' a sort of externally validated positionality in lieu of the uncertainty of an

un-legitimated hybridized existence. And they seem to resonate with a human social need for the collective reinforcement of their individual social choices, particularly in circumstances characterized by instability and dispute.

Postmodernist critiques might also refer to the individual's obsolescence in navigating these circumstances. And yet, it is the individual who chooses and somehow integrates these disparate identity components into the continuous whole described (erroneously or not) by respondents. It is the individual who negotiates which of these components to emphasize depending on variable social contexts. It is the individual who interacts with social contexts in their quotidian interactions. As it pertains to European Muslims' identity construction, the postmodernist approach quite usefully depicts the nature of social circumstances, but appears to underestimate the enduring agency of individuals who remain considerably concerned with crafting identities that fulfill established ideals of coherency. 'Like it or not,' Brumann writes, 'it appears that people—and not only those with power—want bounded culture, and they often want it in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized and timeless fashion that most of us now reject' (1999: S11 in Grillo, 2003).

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