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Re-Placing the Term 'British Muslim': Discourse, Difference and the Frontiers of Muslim Agency in Britain

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Abstract

The term 'British Muslim' has over the last three decades become a familiar part of public discourse, to the extent that it is becoming naturalised as a neutral social descriptor rather than as an active or contested concept. This article examines the genealogy of the term in relation to three overlapping discourses: (i) state-led discourses of racialised citizenship (ii) tacit academic support for forms of civic nationalism and (iii) emergent Muslim agencies and mobilisations through the concept of 'British Muslim'. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the article interrogates the tension between determinism and agency contained within conceptions of British Muslimness. It is claimed that while the term 'British Muslim' is implicated by public debates concerning racialised citizenship – and a corresponding academic response viz civic nationalism – there is a flourishing of Muslim imaginaries through the re-appropriation of British Muslimness. The article therefore offers new theoretical insights into the language concerning Muslim minorities and makes a series of methodological observations that are relevant for writing and research conducted in this field.

Key words: *British Muslims; Islam; Derrida; Foucault; racialisation; civic nationalism; citizenship*

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s there was a well-documented shift from a discourse of race – and the term 'Black' for non-White communities – to a more layered discussion of ethnicity. Since the events of the Rushdie Affair in the late 1980s and early 1990s – coupled with a wider resurgence of public religion[1] – this social lexicon additionally began to emphasise religion and faith as central to any analysis of minority ethnic experience. These changes were not confined to academic writing; indeed, they have convincingly penetrated the language of governance, media and community activism[2]. Since the 1990s, in the UK, these debates have more often than not revolved around the term 'British Muslim'.

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This social-national-religious category has risen to prominence for a number of reasons: as strategic positioning by Muslims themselves, as a consequence of media and political debates post-Rushdie, but also as a result of scholarly work that has prioritised the overlooked dimension of religion. We therefore have a lineage of terms that have each provided a critical lens through which to understand a particular section of society – a succession of categories that, whilst nonetheless describing *the same* social subject, have transitioned more recently from 'Black' through to 'South Asian' and finally to 'British Muslim'.

This shift in focus and the development of a new vocabulary has been a positive step forward, representing as it does a more nuanced appreciation of identity, as well as a response to a demand for recognition by Muslims themselves. The term also brackets an undeniable set of common practices and experiences that are a feature of everyday life for Muslims in the UK, from the challenges of religious nurture[3] through to the difficulties around 'integration' debates[4] and Islamophobia[5]. However, I argue here that use of the term 'British Muslim' has become increasingly embedded and unreflective across a range of contexts, to the extent that it can be naturalised as a neutral descriptor rather than as an active concept that is implicated in wider public debates concerning citizenship and public religion.

Of course, in academic writing the prioritisation of religion has not prevented an appreciation of diversity and complexity within the category itself. Multi-layered social research has begun to uncover many of these internal complexities, from regional variances across the British Isles[6], to sectarian heterogeneity[7] and cultural, class-laden and generational developments.[8] Furthermore, Muslims in Britain have re-appropriated the term and are projecting emergent identities built upon varied conceptions of British Muslimness. There is, then, a complex intertwining of writing, experience and debate, from varied perspectives, that are mutually anchored around the category and concept of 'British Muslim'.

In this paper I explore the implications of these overlapping discourses and consider the analytical, methodological and ethical appropriateness of the term 'British Muslim'. In doing so I attempt to balance out the risks of over-determination and overbearing public discourse, on the one hand, with undoubted Muslim agency and imagination on the other. Drawing on the work of Foucault and Derrida throughout the paper, I consider both the deterministic and disruptive possibilities contained within the category. I argue that it is shaped by state-led discourses relating to racialised citizenship and public religion, but that it is also manifested in ways that resist, subvert or reorient such language. The paper has four principle sections (along with a final concluding section). These numbered sections are as follows:

1. British Muslims and Public Discourse in the UK.
2. Writing 'British Muslims': Civic Nationalism and the Politics of Identity.
3. Muslim Agency and Identity Politics in Britain.
4. A Derridean Approach: Finding Meaning Through Difference.

In the first three of these sections I consider in turn the way in which (1.) state-led public discourses, (2.) academic writing and (3.) Muslim agency have shaped conceptions of the term 'British Muslim'. In the final section (4.) I examine the relational aspects of the term and suggest that it needs to be continually *re-placed*: that is, rather than rejecting or resisting it (or placing it under erasure in a Derridean fashion), we must uproot each specific instance of use,

examine the contextual relationships and meanings contained within the term, and then place it back as a means to consciously nurture the many different ways of articulating and being 'British Muslim'.

The methodological approach outlined in this paper has value for two reasons. First, it recognises that the way in which the term is used is valuable social data in itself – it is not so much a descriptor as it is an object of analysis. Second, it avoids a negative, relativistic scepticism – one that simply aims to debunk (or deconstruct) 'supposed' social realities – and instead recognises the centrality of that which Latour has described as 'matters of concern.'[9] In essence, this approach demands that we analyse the imperfections, complexities and complicities of the term, but that we also acknowledge, notwithstanding such flaws, the centrality of the category as a 'matter of concern' for public debate and for the lived experiences of Muslims in the UK.

1. British Muslims and Public Discourse in the UK

Conceptual Definition and Over-Determination

Gilliat-Ray provides a credible defence for the conceptual and analytic focus on 'Muslims in Britain' (the nuances of difference between this term and 'British Muslim' are considered in a later section). Gilliat-Ray's argument is simple and persuasive: "Muslims in Britain arguably have sufficiently shared beliefs and practices to warrant their categorisation as a distinctive group."[10] Social research necessitates the decision to generalise around broad themes and groupings – usually with acknowledgment of the limits to this approach – so it is reasonable, given shared and overlapping experiences, to recognise the distinctive grouping together of Muslims in Britain. In principle this is no different to how any other group might be conceptualised by social researchers, whether cutting along the lines of ethnicity, gender, age, class or other features of social experience.

An important caveat to this claim is that, for any individual or community, notions of group-hood are always multiple and contextual. Time and place determine with which group one might identify at any particular moment, with the attendant risk that context can lead to group membership being over-determined. It has been claimed that Muslims in Britain are increasingly seen through the singular prism of religion, often to the detriment of other defining characteristics or associations,[11] or through the imposition of an involuntary identity.[12] Scholarly work is often agonisingly self-aware of these risks. However, there is a continued ethical imperative for researchers to consider the role that their work might have in sustaining simplistic, problematic or even ideologically-hijacked narratives. A series of more recent publications for popular consumption – influential in the wider public realm despite their limitations – have emerged in part through this continuing focus on a discourse relating to 'British Muslims'. The most high-profile of these publications highlight the risks of overdetermined religious identity. Notable examples include *The Battle for British Islam*[13] and *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*.[14] Written by highly-visible and not unsympathetic public figures – Sara Khan, founder of the NGO, *Inspire*, and BBC journalist Innes Bowen – these titles nonetheless rely on the premise that extremist/counter-extremist and/or sectarian struggles undergird a shared 'British Muslim' reality. Leaving aside the debatable accuracy of

these claims, one might still seek to question whether these narratives are not actually partly, or even largely, responsible for the context through which such identities have become crystallised – and to consider the enabling role of several decades of academic writing on British Muslim identity.

Foucault, Discourse and Subjectivisation

A Foucauldian archaeology of the discourse surrounding British Muslims has yet to be conducted – surely an extensive undertaking – but it is pertinent here to reflect on the potential for this line of analysis. Although it hardly needs an introduction, Foucault advanced the claim that there is a fundamental relationship between power and the production of knowledge. According to Foucault, local forms of social governance – from schools and hospitals to prisons and asylums – "act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things".[15] In so doing they generate the meaning and ideas, the discourses, that regulate individual behaviour. Central to this theory is the argument that a discourse determines an approved subject of knowledge – that which we can *validly know* – with the corollary that individuals become subjectivised through this act of knowledge creation. Thus, a discourse on sexuality generates, among other things, the concept of homosexuality, internalised by 'the knowing self', which results in the emergence of a section of society that operates beneath the label 'homosexual'.[16] According to Foucault, through an archaeology of knowledge, it is possible to uncover the historical assumptions and logic that has enabled the formation of seemingly universal and ideologically-free statements and ideas.[17]

To be a 'British Muslim' – to be subject to the term, identity and examination that this entails – is, through a Foucauldian analysis, to be caught in the tailwind of a discourse that stretches back nearly three decades. It is, furthermore, a discourse that has shaped the subjectivisation of British Muslimness. While the term 'British Muslim' was already present in academic literature pre-'Rushdie Affair'[18], it was subsequent to the events surrounding the publication of the *Satanic Verses* that this concept and mark of identity gained widespread traction.[19] BBC news bulletins in 1990 referred, perhaps for the first time in mainstream public debate, to 'British Muslim leaders' and accompanied political demands for the management of this newly discovered section of society. The UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) was established by a group of Muslim professionals in 1992, broadly with the aim of advocating for the interests of Muslims in Britain, and as a precursor to the more fully-formed Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) that replaced it in 1997. The evolution of policy alongside these developments – most notably the seminal Runnymede report on Islamophobia[20]– and the election of a Labour government, also in 1997, instigated a period of civic renewal based around categories of minority religion. Structural changes to national governance included the formation of the Home Office Faith Relations Unit in 2003.[21] These developments, of course, occurred alongside various crises that included terrorist attacks, riots in northern towns, and foreign military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the subsequent political engagement of Muslims in anti-war demonstrations, sparking a widespread and continued focus on, first, integration and community cohesion, followed by later debates relating to terrorism and radicalisation. The controversial anti-radicalisation programme Preventing Extremism Together (PET), now known more widely as Prevent, developed in response to the 2005

London bombings, is only perhaps the most recent development of a politically-charged discourse relating to the relationship between the state and Muslims in Britain.

Racialised Citizenship, Multiculturalism and the Secular State

The purpose of this potted history has been to bring in to focus the wider political and social context that has surrounded the emergence of a new language concerning Muslim communities in Britain. Regardless of academic merits concerning the use of the term 'British Muslim', it would be naive to uncouple critically-informed language from any wider context or sentiment. It is important to note again here the parallel and connected movements that run across these phases of recent political and social history. Alongside marked developments relating to governance and public faith, there have also been changes in the language and approach of scholastic research, as well as undoubted agency and maturation amongst Muslim communities themselves in the UK. In a sense many of these trajectories now converge in their own way on a shared, if contested, discourse relating to British Muslims. It is remarkable, then, that the conceptual foundations of this discourse have not been brought more in to question.

Those early BBC news broadcasts, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with their reference to 'British Muslim leaders', are fascinating due to the assumed and implicit acceptance of an existing and definable community. More importantly, the requirement of leadership suggests an interface between a group and those external to it – in the post-Rushdie context this was undoubtedly British Muslims, on the one hand, against a wider body politic on the other. The language is therefore one of diplomacy, dialogue and an implied separateness, rather than a neutral or clearly defined sets of descriptors. Formal articulation of this language emerged in 1996 with the establishment of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. Following the template laid down by a similar 1992 commission on antisemitism in the UK[22], this new commission and a series of subsequent reports[23] began to embed the notion that there is indeed, out there, a British Muslim section of society – a group that furthermore requires specific, possibly legislative, definition and protection.

The link to earlier work on antisemitism is critical because of the disjuncture between Jewish identity – with definable ethnic characteristics that comfortably admit a tradition of secular Jewishness – and a more complicated Muslim identity where crosscutting ethnic, regional, civilizational and religious/secular identities are perhaps less containable. There has also been, of course, a natural outgrowth from the lineaments of a discourse on race and migration, which often problematically hitched together citizenship and ethnicity without adequate concern for the ruptures and trajectories of postcolonial imagination.[24] These debates in the 1990s revealed the secular nature of the liberal multicultural state in Britain.[25] While often well-intentioned, these initiatives were driven by the impetus of a communal anti-racism politics that either mishandled religion as a category or sought to manage it, through state codification and neutrality, within a broader spectrum of permitted difference. [26]British Muslims, as a new unit of governance and analysis, were slotted in beneath an overarching framework of racialised citizenship.

The liberal multiculturalism of the 1990s was seemingly challenged in 2001 by the publication of *The Cantle Report*, following the riots in northern towns and cities.[27] Notoriously, it introduced the concept of parallel lives and made recommendations for a

government strategy to promote 'community cohesion'.[28] While Cantle avoids any specific reference to 'British Muslims' as such, the report nonetheless links concerns with a weakened national firmament – including around 'British citizenship' and 'British history' – to casual and ill-defined language concerning 'Muslim communities', 'Muslim youth', 'Muslim schools' and 'Muslim parents'. It is through this report and subsequent debates that the conjoining of 'British' and 'Muslim' takes place with radical force. A later concern with extremism, following the London bombings in 2005, has only served to reinforce and naturalise much of this language. A charged profusion of terms – including the more frequent use of 'British Muslim' – was developed through many of these initiatives alongside a policy remit that was extended to include state interest in Muslims and community groups, organisations, mosques, prisons, schools, gender relations, young people and religious training. The demands of adequate governance and management of Muslim communities has further encouraged the proliferation of a panoply of extra-governmental think tanks and organisations focussed on the issue of 'British Muslim citizenship'.

While the toughening of this policy approach – articulated in David Cameron's 2011 call for a 'muscular liberalism' – apparently attempts to move beyond the perceived failures of a pre-2001 multiculturalism, it is notable that the conceptual framework and language remains, not only intact, but more acute and unquestioned than before. Thus, for example, 2008 proposals for a 'British Muslim Citizenship Toolkit' (creating 'pathways' to a 'new vision of British Islam') are now replicated, if refocused, in the 2015 'Prevent Toolkit' (with proposals for anti-extremism 'Channel panels' in education providers). Simultaneous to this, of course, has been the widely debated funnelling of public funding, through the counter-extremism programme, Prevent, to organisations that are either quiescent or aligned with a prevailing policy agenda.[29]

The development of a discourse on 'British Muslims' over the last three decades, from Rushdie through to Prevent, is susceptible, as I have indicated, to a standard Foucauldian reading. Through this, it can be argued, a dominant vision of citizenship is embedded in the 'micro-power' of governance:[30] an arid, state-led approach that is not only rationalistic, technocratic and politically diluted, but one that continues a discourse of secular universalism based around governing categories of civic renewal and compressed ethnic identity. The term 'British Muslim' – through widespread and uncritical use – becomes an active concept of management and subjectivisation, alongside the simultaneous suppression of Muslim political mobilisation, agency or subaltern counter-publics.[31] While this presents a set of implications for scholarly work concerned with the social scientific study of Muslims in Britain – notably the extent to which these parameters are maintained or subverted through academic writing – a Foucauldian approach is nonetheless not entirely satisfactory.

2. Writing 'British Muslims': Civic Nationalism and the Politics of Identity

The Post-Rushdie Academic Landscape

While scholarly writing has grappled for more than three decades with multivariate conceptions of British Muslimness[32], there is a noticeable trend toward the language becoming normalised and self-sustaining in relation to the conceptual stability of a pre-given 'British

Muslim' *subject of inquiry*. Debates over (British) Muslim identity are well-worn and do not require an unnecessary re-treading here. Nor do I contend that these arguments have been in any way unhelpful or misplaced. Rather, I make the more guarded suggestion towards the end of this article that use of the term 'British Muslim' needs to be continually *re-placed*. It is a stepping back, therefore, and a cautionary reminder to consider the ethical dimensions of conceptual imbrication and linguistic freighting.

The intellectual and political saliency of the term 'British Muslim' was first raised through academic writing as a response to the justified demands of Muslims in Britain themselves – although cautionary voices questioned from the outset the theoretical credibility of such an approach. Nielsen raised this point directly, in 1987, through a probing article that explored the tensions between the 'integrating' and 'dividing' tendencies that have historically been at work in Islamic history. Nielsen aptly summarised those political demands through reference to the ethnically-marked multicultural debates of the time:

> In his recent interview of the Church of England report *Faith in the City*, Mark Johnson remarked that 'it is time that those involved in race relations should take religion as seriously as religionists are taking race'. This comment echoes a long-standing dissatisfaction among members of the Muslim community leadership, who have felt that the structures of white British society are, at best, blind to the existence of a Muslim community in this country or, at worst, ignoring it by insisting on what are, from a Muslim point of view, divisive concepts of ethnicity or assimilationist concepts of race. Thus, it is felt, Muslims are viewed either as 'Pakistani' or 'black', both of which contradict the Muslim ideal of one united Muslim community, the *umma*.[33]

Nielsen straddles two competing tendencies that have subsequently been at play within academic writing. This involves engaging with the socio-political paradigm of the time – in this case a multiculturalism of race and ethnicity – while also contending with the centrifugal force of a civilizational Islamic tradition and the fine-grained reality of transnational/global religion.

The complexity of this emergent landscape contained a set of connected and multi-focal research agendas. There was an examination of the point of contact between the new politics of Muslim identity[34] and broader questions of 'racial' equality and citizenship.[35] Alongside this, Lewis[36] provided the first detailed examination of the religious lives of South Asian Muslims in Britain, whilst Anwar outlined a broader demographic picture that was linked to generational change.[37] Cultural anthropology, most prominently through the work of Werbner,[38] introduced a concern with concepts such as myth, memory and space. Although common themes resound – including transnationalism, identity and minority experience – this latticework of literature is shaded by disciplinary trends in politics, sociology, anthropology and religious studies – forms of writing that are held together by a shared concern with the same subject of inquiry: Muslims in Britain.

Of particular note here is the development of a linguistic and conceptual framework to buttress this burgeoning field of inquiry. The language oscillates between 'Muslims', 'British Muslims', 'Muslims in Britain' and ethnically-inflected variants such as 'Pakistani Muslims'

or 'British Pakistani Muslims'. A common terminology is neither agreed upon nor explicitly debated, with preference guided by the specific nature of the research itself. Of course, this ambivalence merely reflects the social and political currents of the time – Muslim cries of '*who* are we?' echoed by a scholastic 'but *whom* do we study?'. The flexing of identity is therefore both omnipresent and critically acute during this post-Rushdie period.[39]

'British Muslims': An Active Concept

From the late 1990s and early 2000s academic language appears to have crystallised around two key terms: 'British Muslims' and 'Muslims in Britain'. Often used interchangeably and without critical reflection on potential differences between the two – although of course identity debates continue apace – the terms appear to be used with equal favour and incidence. However, a notable trend has started to emerge over time, with the gradual preference for 'British Muslims' in place of 'Muslims in Britain'. Using a bibliographic database, Scopus, it is possible to quantify this change by generating an index of academic sources that use the specific terms 'British Muslims' and 'Muslims in Britain' (see Table 1). While other databases provide different results, due to variations of indexed literature, the trend remains largely consistent. In this table I have included an equivalent set of data relating to Christians for the purpose of a comparative discussion.

Table 1. Index of Academic Sources Using Terms 'British Muslims' & 'Muslims in Britain'

Year	"British Muslims"	"Muslims in Britain"	"British Christians"	"Christians in Britain"
2000	12	12	0	307
2001	12	4	1	322
2002	25	8	1	453
2003	40	10	0	751
2004	65	17	3	829
2005	62	16	6	977
2006	94	42	8	1153
2007	123	65	7	1388
2008	120	61	3	1524
2009	177	84	15	1866
2010	224	127	10	2165
2011	249	139	6	2530
2012	306	154	21	2843
2013	326	151	18	2780
2014	292	113	8	2358
2015	304	128	14	2375
2016	247	80	7	1821

Source: Scopus Bibliographic Database [accessed June 2017]

While based on a small number of publications – with this particular field still a minority interest during the 1990s – 'British Muslims' and 'Muslims in Britain' were seemingly used as often as one another until the end of the decade. As I have already suggested, the language during this period was more uncertain and in flux. However, from 2001, there is a clear trend as 'British Muslim' becomes a preferred term over 'Muslims in Britain' by a factor ranging from two to four. Given the rapid political upheaval for Muslims over this twenty-year period, it would be a little artificial to attribute specific causal events to this change. More likely, it is a confluence of factors including the cementing of self-identified British Muslim identity alongside a settling of academic language and wider public recognition for the term. The question is: does it matter?

I contend that there are nuances of meaning between the two terms. 'Muslims in Britain' more *descriptively* designates a religious group within a defined national/geographic context, while in contrast, 'British Muslim' *actively* yokes together a form of civic nationalism with religious identity. While both terms might often be appropriate, accurate and defensible, they are not synonymous with one another.

A comparison with scholarly writing about Christianity is instructive. References to 'British Christians' are practically non-existent when compared with the widespread use of 'Christians in Britain'. Phrases such as 'Christian Britain' and 'Christianity in Britain' are also comfortably embedded in core literature.[40] For Christianity, then, there is an understandable assumption that Christian history, identity and practice are fissured through the bedrock of Britain, including more recent secularist developments.[41] British Christian identities need not therefore a positive articulation so much as reverse engineering from other forms of institutional and everyday life in Britain. Christian identities are located within, rather than alongside, conceptions of Britishness.

In contrast, widespread use of the term 'British Muslim' is often both a *defensive* and a *positive* recognition that "subscribing to a Muslim identification is not necessarily synonymous with religiosity alone but relates to a transformation of ethnic identity within the context of British society".[42] While this claim could hardly be made about Christianity in Britain, the inability to uncouple British Muslimness from other forms of minority claim-making is inherently important. The term is defensive, asserting strategic minority identities,[43] within the ambit of British culture because it is often a direct challenge to the pressure of state-led discourses around national integration and belonging. Yet it is also positive, as a form of civic nationalism, in that it attempts to recast the national-political superstructure as both secular and plural, or put another way, to dissolve the link between the "majority [religious-ethnic] culture" and a more inclusive "general political culture".[44] As a term, then, the use of 'British Muslim' proceeds within the parameters of a logic that claims:

> [I]t does not make sense to encourage strong multicultural or minority identities and weak common or national identities; strong multicultural identities are a good thing – they are not intrinsically divisive, reactionary or subversive – but they need the complement of a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives and the ceremonies and rituals which give expression to a national identity.[45]

The term 'British Muslim' fuses together both an assertion of religious and ethnic minority cultural belonging in Britain – one of several "vibrant, dynamic, national narratives" – with the politically-inflected demand for a multicultural, civic framework that brackets such differences.

To return to my earlier claim, there is then an important difference between 'Muslims *in* Britain' and 'British-Muslims'. The former is descriptive, passive, suggesting identity and parameters of context, while the latter is active, always containing an implied hyphenation and corresponding vitality. Both are credible and often appropriate terms, but despite a seeming synonymy in academic literature they can be seen to function in different ways. Of course, the substantive theme of emergent and contested British Muslim identities are often in the foreground – for example, in Muslim cultural production[46] or the formation of political values[47] – but they can lack a foundational conceptual and linguistic interrogation. Beyond semantics, this does raise methodological and ethical issues. First, can we write about British Muslims from a distance – can we ever displace *our* writing from active complicity with overbearing political and social discourse? Second, what role does British Muslim agency have within these debates?

3. Muslim Agency and Identity Politics in Britain

Subjectivisation and Anti-Essentialism

The mobilisation of Muslim identity politics has received notable attention from both a normative[48] and theoretical perspective.[49] These discussions are relevant here in so much as they inform a critical approach to the relationship between dominant language and Muslim self-definition. At stake is the nature of the link between Muslim agency and the sediments of a discourse that, when undisturbed, otherwise remain capable of exerting a formative pressure on the tenements of public debate and Muslim self-realisation. Rather than suggesting, as with Foucault, that the aim is "not to discover what we are, but refuse what we are"[50], I instead argue that Muslims both destabilise particular forms of subjectification – working from within established discourse through a form of 'resistance identity'[51] – while also bending it to new and imaginative trajectories. The term 'British Muslim' is therefore substantive, while simultaneously lacking any sense of consistent solidity – it is real, charged and instrumental, yet also imagined, efflorescent and contextual. This is markedly evident within a British Muslim identity politics that stretches from institution building, to democratic participation, civic engagement, and cultural production.

Jonathan Birt has knotted together similar observations in a cautioning critique of anti-essentialist arguments against the reification of Muslim identity.[52] The central claim made by Birt is that poststructuralist attempts to disrupt preconceived or overarching forms of identity overlook the way in which an emergent politics can 'conflate older identities and thus in a new configuration upset the old political arrangements'. With British Muslim activism around Islamophobia and the anti-war movement in view, Birt argues:

> It is this misconception that has similarly dogged the debate around Muslims (and other social groups) and multiculturalism, by only focusing on how the dominant discourse appears entirely to shape the discourse of community leaders who purport to lead communities with discrete cultures that may be neatly managed, particularly by local government…[53]

Specifically, then, Birt suggests that Islamophobia has created a 'community of suffering' that – despite internal differences – rallies around a reified identity for the purpose of political mobilisation, before then developing broader conceptions of a humanitarian Islam that reaches beyond the seeming cantons of Muslim life. Critically, it is from this initial act of 'strategic essentialism'[54] that new imaginations, identities and political spaces have been able to emerge.

This claim can be extended beyond Islamophobia and the anti-war movement to consider the more general application of British Muslimness. As a term 'British Muslim' provides not simply the foundation for an identity – strategic or otherwise – but rather an ideological space through which to develop meaning-making. Thus, 'British Muslim' as a concept/identity is not singular nor static, but exponential and vehicular – it is always contingent and contested, multiple and in motion. While this does permit a Foucauldian argument *viz* subjectivisation through discourse, it also suggests that the term is uncontainable. Muslims in Britain have seized the label 'British Muslim' and are deploying it to advance a series of diverse (and often divergent) political, cultural, social and religious solidarities. This efflorescence is perhaps a response to the heightened civic consciousness that has been thrust upon Muslims during the development of a discourse concerning loyalty and belonging. Regardless, the foci of these emergent solidarities often vary between overlapping transformative engagements with the secular nation state and broader transnational or global imaginaries. This understanding of social solidarities, as Calhoun has argued, is not based upon the sharp distinction between "a matter of inheritance and essential commonality or a matter of free-flowing ubiquitous and undetermined construction". Rather, solidarities are "socially produced, shaped by material factors, culturally organized and yet also open to human action."[55] This contextuality and contingence is therefore always present in actual experiences of British Muslimness; that is, in the ongoing and contested construction of *being* 'British Muslim'.

Emergent British Muslim Imaginaries

In the realm of political action, for example, there are multiple ways through which the term 'British Muslim' is mobilised as an active concept and site of solidarity. Hussain[56] suggests that this can range from opposition to the system (with groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir) – a negation of British Muslimness in favour of a particular form of universal Muslimness – to the promotion of an alternative system (such as a Muslim parliament and Muslim manifesto), through to direct involvement with the political system (within existing political parties or via alternatives such as the Islamic Party of Britain), through to lobbying organisations or grassroots civic action. Mustafa[57] finds a similar spectrum with respect to political identities among young Muslims, ranging from alienation through to active participation. On a national stage, Muslim political personalities and ideologies vary from the one-nation conservatism of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, to the promotion of secular Muslimness by Quilliam Foundation

founder and former Liberal Democrat candidate Maajid Nawaz, through to the locally-conceived pluralism and cosmopolitanism of London Mayor Sadiq Khan. In each case, to a lesser or greater extent, political identities and values are articulated through variant conceptions of British Muslimness.

Similarly, religious arrangements are composed via new or more recently evolving Muslim networks and institutions in the UK. Competing traditions of religious scholarship find expression through institutions that range from the Cambridge Muslim College and the Markfield Institute, both establishing frameworks of secular education and civic-minded faith leadership, through to Deobandi *dar ul-uloom*, which draw more directly from socially conservative traditions of Islamic learning while nonetheless adapting slowly to the prevailing norms of British Higher Education[58]. Critically, these institutions all explicitly frame themselves as contextualised by their location in the UK, while advancing inflected versions of Islamic pedagogy and British Muslimness. Looser networks include the leadership and interfaith focus of state-society mediating organisations, such as Imams Online, to the grassroots flourishing of neo-Sufi *tariqats* and Salafi-oriented religious revivalist groups.[59] Whether grasping the label 'British Muslim' directly or not, these networks and institutions represent new and emergent religious perspectives – trajectories that inevitably operate within a space marked out by notions of British Muslimness. Diverse, sometimes divergent, or even in opposition, these religious trends offer evolving conceptions of how to *be* 'British Muslim' – articulations that simultaneously project varied religious subjectivities into the fabric of British society.

Muslim lay organisations in particular operate at the crux of different 'British Muslim' solidarities and forms of meaning-making. Islamic charities, for example, play a central role in the everyday religious lives of Muslims in Britain.[60] They enable engagement with the religious strictures of *zakat*, while furthermore extending the ethical horizons of an humanitarian Islam. Ongoing debates continue with regard to the moral hierarchy of those who benefit from such charity – whether to support the homeless in London and victims of domestic abuse in Birmingham, or to look toward war-torn Yemen and Syria, or more tangible ethnic links for South Asian Muslims to the poverty of Pakistan or Bangladesh. Working on the frontlines of anti-Muslim prejudice, organisations such as Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) and Tell Mama each accordingly assert the public voice of Muslims in Britain on social issues such as Islamophobia. Similarly, the emergence of British Muslim media – from broadcasters such as youth-focused British Muslim TV to South Asian lifestyle-inflected British Muslim Magazine – markedly demonstrate the crisscrossing streams of Muslim social and cultural life. Burgeoning realms of creative activity – including Muslim musicians, filmmakers, playwrights and the broader British Muslim arts movement[61] – further testify to the many voices that contribute toward 'British Muslim' forms of consciousness in the UK.

Clearly, these broadly sketched areas of political, religious, social and cultural activity only lightly scratch the depth and complexity of Muslim solidarities and activity in Britain. My aim is not simply to celebrate or acknowledge an obvious plurality, but to point toward the ways in which Muslims play an active role in shaping, reacting to and working within wider public and academic forms of representation. If, as I have suggested from the perspective of scholarly writing, that the term 'British Muslim' is both reactive and positive, then this also holds true

in relation to Muslim agencies that work from within this governing concept. The lodestone for Muslim agency in Britain is clearly an overarching discourse on 'British Muslims', which ensures that citizenship, belonging and religion in the public sphere remain guiding principles. Yet, a sensitivity to civic virtue and the dimensional, constructed nature of the body politic provides a springboard for new Muslim imaginaries. It is a creative syncretism and synthesis that can range across the merging of British political ideologies with faith-based activism, to the meshing of pedagogical and intellectual heritage, to the expansion of an Islamically-informed civil society, or the development of Muslim cultural and media resources in the public sphere. While 'British Muslim' therefore operates as a governing concept, it is inherently mutable, active and internally diverse/divergent – or put another way, it is *not* analytically stable, descriptive or politically neutral.

4. A Derridean Approach: Finding Meaning Through Difference

Searching for a New Language

Over the course of this article I have made three central claims. First, 'British Muslim' is an active concept, linked to a wider discourse on citizenship and religion, so therefore lacks operational neutrality. Second, the term 'British Muslim' is widespread across both public debate and academic writing, to the point where it risks erroneously becoming embedded as a pre-given social descriptor. Third, the term has been re-appropriated by Muslims and serves as a vehicle for various forms of Muslim agency. In accepting these claims, it is necessary to thread a conceptual needle that permits a resistance to essentialism and homeostasis, on the one hand, while also enabling and acknowledging a critical engagement with emergent solidarities and forms of meaning-making on the other. This dilemma cuts to the quick of issues around majority-minority relations and touches upon the ethical knottiness within Charles Taylor's 'Politics of Recognition'.[62]

This debate is not entirely new and has been thrashed about before in relation to ethnicity. Sayyid broaches similar concerns in a notable critique of the term 'British Asian', similarly drawing on Foucault, to suggest that:

> …the use of British as prefix or suffix establishes a superficial relationship between Asian and British. The identity of British or Asian is not radically transformed by being conjoined – thus allowing for the possibility of disaggregating the British from the Asian…[63]

I have a made a similar claim with regard to 'British Muslim': that the term unavoidably carries with it the baggage of citizenship demands and a subtle questioning of belonging. Sayyid's solution is to propose the concept of BrAsian, not as a 'fusion' of the two terms but rather as a 'confusion' that recognises the 'impossibility of a hyphenated identity'. Drawing on the Derridean and Heideggerian concept of *sous rature* (under erasure), Sayyid suggests that BrAsian can be crossed through – placed under erasure – by a postcolonial line. This recognises that while the term is "not the correct answer" nor is it possible to find a "better answer we can turn to".[64]

Sayyid's proposal is attractive and analytically sound, but the proposed term 'BrAsian' remains nonetheless a rather artificial conjuring that has failed to gain traction. Nonetheless, the application of Derrida can be used and extended in relation to the term 'British Muslim'. Derrida was principally writing from a phenomenological and semiotic perspective, so these ideas need guarded attention when used sociologically, yet the spirit of deconstruction has always remained consistently levelled against the 'white mythologies' of Western ethnocentrism.[65] Several principles of this approach can be fruitfully developed: the deconstructive requirement to work from within language systems; Derrida's concept of meaning through *différance*; and the technique of *sous rature* (under erasure). Each of these will be examined in turn below.

British Muslims: Resisting a 'Metaphysics of Presence'

Derrida's principle claim is that we cannot work outside pre-existing structures of language, even when attempting to disrupt or deconstruct them, for we operate "necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure."[66] This has of course been significantly developed within the discipline of postcolonial/subaltern studies[67] and it should not be forgotten that the study of Muslim minorities often falls squarely within the ethical and philosophical scope of this field. Critically, the central thrust of this discipline contends that minority experiences are shaped by the social, economic and political geographies of post-Empire and postcolonial settlements.

While certainly not forgotten in academic writing, this approach risks becoming dislodged from the foreground by a turn toward everyday religion,[68] including for the study of Islam,[69] and by a connected Latourian de-emphasis of wider social forces or frames.[70] While such research is both commendable and valuable, my point here, *à la* Derrida, is that even the 'tactical religion' of the everyday[71] is reliant on the language and conceptual resources of wider social and political structures. For Muslims in Britain this wider context of meaning-making is undoubtedly a public discourse relating to citizenship, belonging and public religion. These debates seep into the everyday, not necessarily at the expense of agency, but certainly through the provision of a conceptual vocabulary that influences any understanding of the term 'British Muslim' and by extension shapes individual or group experiences of *being* Muslim i.e., of Muslimness. It is not so much therefore about considering the possibilities of escaping, resisting or being controlled by a discourse about British Muslims, but more the sense of an unavoidable linguistic and conceptual habitat that provides many (though not all) of the resources used in developing an understanding of the term 'British Muslim'. As I argued earlier, these resources relate specifically to a tradition of British liberal multiculturalism and civic nationalism, including around categories of race and ethnicity (and the racialisation of Muslims), but also narratives relating to the secular nation state and UK-wide majority-minority relations.

As a point of comparison, one might consider how the British context provides different (if often overlapping) conceptual resources to other European and North American contexts. In the United States, for example, the widespread use of 'Muslim American' is built on a racialised civil rights movement and discourse of social categorisation (e.g., with an historical focus on African Americans). Muslim Americans themselves correspondingly syncretise

national imaginaries of the American dream, civic 'melting pot' inclusion and (more negatively) resistance to a dominant and state-led neo-Orientalist perspective of Muslim majority societies.[72] Specific histories, national debates and social-political contexts therefore provide alternative conceptual and linguistic resources – Derrida's language structures – to develop subtly *different* forms of identity and terminology. We might also consider the intra forms of difference that are contained within all forms of religious and social categorisation. By this I mean that, for example, both 'British Muslim' and 'Muslim American' lack any interior stability of meaning and are internally diverse. Difference is contained within these concepts, not just self-evidently between them, so that different forms of meaning coalesce around each specific term e.g., 'British Muslim' simultaneously means many different things, for different people, and in different contexts.

'Difference': 'British Muslim' as Relational and Temporal

Derrida has written extensively about the concept of 'difference' as part of a Heideggerian critique of the 'metaphysics of presence'. Notably, Derrida examines the etymology of the word 'difference' and suggests that it contains two active components. The components are constitutive of the elementary parts of language systems: the idea of distinction or a lack of sameness, and of deferral or delay. Derrida provides a neologism to capture this multivalence: *différance*. The term is simultaneously able to "temporalize, to resort, consciously or unconsciously, to the temporal and temporalizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of "desire" but also the requirement that "interval, distance, *spacing* occur among the different elements and occur actively, dynamically, and with a certain perseverance in repetition"[73]. In simplistic terms, Derrida is resisting a supposedly Western pre-supposition that language gives unmediated or stable access to meaning. Instead, Derrida suggests that the constitutive parts of language – signs, codes, metaphors – draw meaning forth only because of their relational and iterative nature. Relational, in the sense that, for example, words only mean something because of their relative relationship to other words (e.g., hot, warm, mild, balmy). Iterative, because language components are necessarily capable of being repeated – in different contexts, for example, or with a change to their relative meaning in an unstable system – and are consequently subject to an evolving mutability (i.e., the meaning of language is never fixed). Thus, according to Derrida, the 'desire' for fixed or transcendental meaning is frustrated by the inherent 'spacing' and 'temporalizing' that is necessarily contained within any language system.

As a principle or an approach, and no more than this I think, a consideration of difference/*différance* provides a number of ways to think about the term 'British Muslim'. Derrida of course is making a broader claim about the nature of language, but there is no need here to accept, deny or otherwise engage with this broader semiotic and philosophical thesis – it is enough to consider how the application of this insight might illuminate our understanding of the term 'British Muslim'. If 'British Muslim' is rejected as a neutral descriptor – if we resist a 'metaphysics of presence' (to borrow Derrida's vocabulary) – then it is necessary to inquire as to how the term draws meaning and what the implications of this are for a more sociological approach.

The term is certainly both externally and internally relational. As a designation that foregrounds national identity, it draws meaning from relational placement to wider concepts and discussions concerning belonging and citizenship. It is difficult to imagine the prefix 'British' as somehow unconnected or independent from a racialised discourse of national inclusion. Yet the term furthermore contains internal relationality, in the sense that there are many fractured and competing manifestations of 'British Muslim'. Muslims themselves debate, formulate and project different understandings of the term. Crucially, these variances are always co-dependent. Thus, for some, 'British Muslim' means cultural assimilation and religious observance. For others, the term designates loyalty to the state alongside cultural and religious distinctiveness. Others use the term as a political identity to either advance Muslim minority rights or to engage in wider citizenship debates from a Muslim perspective. Some Muslim groups in Britain reject identification with the term, seeing it as a deviation from universal belonging to the *umma*, while yet others, in contrast, understand it as a way of celebrating the cultural and social diversity of the *umma*. These examples are illustrative, certainly not exhaustive, but they do point toward the way in which – both because of external and internal relationality – the term 'British Muslim' is always a fluctuating composite of connected and contested ideas. But what is more, 'British Muslim' is not singular and there are indeed many connected versions of the term – *it always means different things*.

This instability is furthermore not just relational (i.e. spatial) but it is also temporal. As a term – or, more properly, a set of phonetically identical but semantically different terms – 'British Muslim' is subject to constant change through reiteration. The contextuality of how the term is used, and by whom, is intersected with a temporal dimension. Obviously, this includes a consideration of *when*. Use of the term during the post-Rushdie era of the 1990s contrasts with, for example, the race debates of the 1980s or the post-9/11 securitisation context of the 2000s. But more importantly, perhaps, temporal aspects also include a projection toward the future. 'British Muslim' acts as a conceptual vehicle for different Muslim imaginaries. It transposes ideologies, utopias, fears and desires over the constantly rewritten palimpsest of the future. Our understanding of 'British Muslim' is therefore contingent on our understanding of the different ways in which it is operationalised, articulated or imagined. The term itself lacks stability or descriptive rigidity, but from a sociological perspective it is precisely this mutability that more properly reflects the richness and depth of social experience.

Under Erasure: Drawing a Line Through 'British Muslim'?

Derrida's approach to this type of conceptual dilemma is to deploy the Heideggerian concept of *sous rature* (under erasure). As I have already explained, this involves crossing out a concept while allowing it to remain visible. It recognises the unsuitability of a term, while also accepting that we have no alternative but to use it. This is in many respects the paradigmatic approach of deconstruction – working from within the system that one intends to subvert or critique. Sayyid uses it to grapple with the blurred concept of BrAsian[74], while it has also of course been deployed as a technique/approach across a wide range of disciplinary and thematic contexts – for example, from ethnicity[75] and race[76] through to the whole panoply of social theory.[77] The utility of this approach is self-evident: it allows for problematisation, reflection, an admission of bias or perspective, without the impossible need to scrap the collective

building blocks of disciplinary discourse. Less charitably, it might be described as a form of scholarly hedging.

The logic of my argument in this paper has brought it to the point where placing 'British Muslim' under erasure *appears* to make sense. The term is unstable, mutable, relational and also derived from particularistic discourses of racialised national belonging. Yet, in a social sense, the term undeniably *exists*. It is in circulation, evokes meaning, and is therefore uncontainable. The aim, then, is to resist using 'British Muslim' as a straightforward social descriptor – in the same way that race and ethnicity refuse simplistic application – and to simultaneously hold in tension both the necessary function of the term and its inherent contradictions. More practically, this approach would impart a responsibility to continually interrogate and problematise the use of 'British Muslim' alongside more normative attempts to describe and analyse the social reality of Muslims in Britain.

The problem with this approach is that it does not provide any tangible benefit beyond giving an access point to better critique the term and other cognate concepts. As Taylor has disparagingly pointed out with reference to "half-baked Neo-Nietzschean theories",[78] such an approach risks becoming overly-negative – denying the positive creation of knowledge – and of suppressing legitimate identities. While there is technical justification for holding terms like 'British Muslim' at a certain critical distance, this somehow seems to go against the reality of those who embrace the term through self-identification. Ethnographically or conceptually refined.

Concluding Remarks: Re-Placing the Term 'British Muslim'

I have argued in this paper that the term 'British Muslim' lacks meaning as a stable or unitary form of description. It is instead an active term that is implicated in wider public discourses of racialised citizenship and state-led governance, although there are numerous critical counterpoints that range from academic writing on civic nationalism through to multiple and emergent Muslim imaginaries. The significance of this state of affairs is that while these different articulations are often divergent or oppositional, they are nonetheless co-dependant. A Derridean approach provides the theoretical framework to consider these relationships. The many different conceptions of 'British Muslim' only make sense when interpreted against one another and when understood as being subject to inevitable change (i.e., Derridean difference and deferral). For example, British Muslimness as a cultural phenomenon – a fusion of ethnic, religious and British culture – can only be comprehended fully if one understands that it is in part both a reaction against public debates concerning Muslim belonging *and* against isolationist claims from conservative Islamic figures. Furthermore, these conceptualisations are each subject to forms of change, mutability and a sense of future possibilities that are reliant on interaction with one another. The term 'British Muslim' is therefore understood and projected in a variety of ways, but each instance emerges through co-dependent jostling and exchange beneath the overarching framework of discourses concerning citizenship and public religion.

In academic writing the term 'British Muslim' should therefore not be used lightly, but rather with a critical contextuality that is sensitive to the unique and inter-relational aspects of each manifestation. I have suggested that this might best be done through a continual re-placing.

Rather than a negative rejection or an unreflective iteration of the term, this is a critical attempt to examine the complex meaning of each use and to carefully set it back within its own unique and relational context. This approach ensures a sensitivity to the plurality of the term, as well as to inherent structural relationships that enable each instance of 'British Muslim' to draw relative meaning from one another. Furthermore, just as importantly, it deals with each articulation of identity, each statement or experience of British Muslimness, on its own terms, without recourse to generalisation or simplification. Such an approach recognises the fragility of each use – the risk of drowning out specific forms of British Muslimness through the replication of simplistic language or public narratives – and it is an attempt to engage in constructive, rather than deconstructive, attempts at analytical observation.

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