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Conditional Whites: An Analysis of Identity Formation Patterns Among Second Generation Arab American Muslims Today

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Conditional Whites: An Analysis of Identity Formation Patterns Among Second Generation
Arab American Muslims Today

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

to mama and baba

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my participants for making this project a reality. For without the time you contributed to the project, and the sentiments and stories you brought forth, this research would not be a reality. I'd like to thank my advisors: thank you, Yuval Elmelech, for being my first introduction into the world of Sociology and guiding me along the last three years worth of semesters, and thank you Peter Klein, for ushering me to the finish line, providing edits, advice, and accountability. Thank you to my best friend, Anamaria Alvarez, because without shared cups of tea on rainy Wednesdays, and panic induced laughing fits, this project and my experience at Bard would not have been the same.

Finally, the greatest of thank yous to my parents, Halima Lahmidi and Abderrahim Jamal. We may not always have gotten along, or seen eye to eye, but without the sacrifices you both made, leaving home, families and your land behind, dreams and perhaps other fates, I would not have been able to make it to where I am today, in the privileged position to study, to create, and to critically think. My elementary school afternoons spent doing homework, with you mama, and the packets of Skittles and Starbursts you'd make sure to buy on your way home from work, baba, are the little things that inspired who I have become today. Shukran mamati and babati.

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Introduction

Neon colored, shiny front Phonics books lined my living room table afternoon in and afternoon out, as did bright orange and turquoise English grammar work books and once sharpened pencils, at 7PM dulled by the scratches and pulls against crisp white sheets, dotting an 'I' here and finishing a math problem there. Most afternoons, it was my mother who found herself in the courtyard of my elementary school, a minute walk from the stoop of our ample apartment. Mingling with other Moroccan women who were bestowed the responsibility to retrieve their little ones, she'd gather my brother and I, our miniature backpacks, usually Jansport, or whatever was on sale that September at Modell's, and shuffle us up the thinly carpeted stairs of our building to the kitchen table for a snack, and almost immediately, homework.

My mother's first language was not English; neither was my father's. Neither of them had or currently have a college diploma. Both remain in arguably "working" or "middle" class occupations. Employing the same vigour they'd imbue a mortar and pestle with for our dinner's cilantro seasoning, they ground into my mind, quite early on, the importance of school, and the importance of being a good Muslim, a good Moroccan. Grades became everything, alongside other dotting duties bestowed upon me. Every quarter, my report card would find its way to mother's hands, its inside sprinkled with the neatly typed praise of my Greek American teachers and dashed with small '4's' in every quadrant. Honor roll, honor's classes, valedictorian. That's who I was, and it remains who I am. Streams of memories like this compose a large part of what moments remain in my mind of childhood in Astoria, New York, a neighborhood filled to the brim with Moroccan and other North African immigrants much like my parents. The connection

between my schooling and the generational experience of being the child of immigrants, Moroccan and American at once, is ingrained in me today. It served to solidify several messages passed down to me: we were us; they were them. Two worlds, so different, yet so intertwined, all at once.

--

Race¹ was never at the forefront of my mind when attempting to figure out my identity as a second generation child of immigrants. More often than not, I was not actively conceptualizing the conundrum of my identity as a racial problem or misidentification. Before I acquired any sociological stamina, I always understood myself to be a Moroccan, and more recently, an Arab, perhaps even an immigrant, as my parents are. From these variables flowed the markers of my exclusion, the things which always made me feel like an outsider, someone far different from the other kids at school, or my neighbors: my name, eternally misspelled and mispronounced; my lack of participation in broadly accepted and recognized holidays; the language I spoke; the religion I practiced; the list can go on.

Ethnicity, culture and religion were the prime signifiers of identity for those around me as well-- the other children of immigrants. Perhaps underneath these layers and deeply enmeshed within them was the consideration of my American identity, one that is a result of my citizenship, my blue passport, and life in New York City. But at the end of the day, my household always put forth that we as a family were Moroccans, and Muslims first, Americans second. And as I grew, learned and traveled through varying educational systems and environments, this identification

¹ For clarification, I am not presenting race as the most central piece of my research, although it plays a significant part in my arguments on racialization and legal identity formation for Arab Americans past and present. I am mentioning race this early to emphasize the fact that my conceptualization of identity was *not* predicated on issues of race.

only became more strained, tested, and withered. I became less and less a part of the world of my home, the roof that held my identity in the tight space of an Arab and Muslim first.

I came to realize the significance of my skin color; the subtle but envy tainted remarks from relatives with darker skin, the way it was praised to be called fair skinned. The way it enabled me to be white in certain spaces, and the advantages it afforded me in escaping the discrimination and microaggressions other Arabs around me faced. The more I consider the growing significance of skin color, and by default racial categories, the more I realize the internal conflict of identity I have yet to solve. Did I always implicitly connect being an American to being a “white person?” If so, what did it mean for me to define people as “white?” Has it always been a matter of skin color? Could it be based on religion, language, maybe even money and social class? How can I reckon with the multiplicity of conflicting parts that make up my whole-- Islam, Arabness, Americanness? What truly contributes to the formation of my identity, and does this identity fit within any boundary or binary category? In a way, these struggles and questions have guided my fascination with race theory, with deconstructing notions of whiteness and how they pertain to those like myself, Arab Americans.

As society has evolved, the concept of skin color has been labelled in different ways. With the rise of identity politics, there is a need for groups to come to be named. People of color (POCs) Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC). Terms like this have dominated the politics and social struggles of the world we live in today, drawing the necessary divides and lines between whites and non-whites. Skin color, literally and metaphorically, is amongst the most salient concepts in America today. In a race, and now increasingly immigrant, dominated society like that of the US, it's often difficult not to fall into the trap of categorizing individuals

based on their skin color, attempting to fit them into the traditional Black/White binary.² But what happens when that can't quite be done? Where do those individuals who do not fit black or white go, like Asian, Latinx, and other ethnic groups? How do we define that grey space? And how do racial and social notions of whiteness remain inextricable from our definitions of being American? There is not a more relevant time than today to unpack the nuances of racial identity formation in this country as a step within one's broader identity formation processes. In this project, I am most concerned with Arab American identity formation. I would like to unpack and explore the variables that dominate the way Arab Americans situate themselves socially, racially and culturally. Given what research must still be done to explore this topic, my senior project will answer the following questions: *What variables contribute most to Arab American identity formation today? In what ways do variables like religion, ethnicity, gender and culture affect Arab American identity formation? What is the relationship, if any, between race, 'whiteness' and MENA identity? How are Arab Americans racialized today?* Beginning with Chapter 2, a historical context detailing the multiple waves of immigration which first brought a multiplicity of Arab ethnicities to this country will be introduced. In the proceeding chapter, I will begin to explore different strands of theories on the variables in question: identity, race, whiteness, and more. This section's primary aim will be a general overview on literature surrounding the topics I pose research questions about. Chapter 4, *if need be*, will be my content analysis chapter, in which I use theory, alongside evidence from public forums, to explore the core concepts that individuals believe are important to Arab American identity formation. Chapters 5 through 7 will delve into the methodology and results of my interviews, in conversation with analysis and discussion of these results. These are the core empirical chapters, and the key themes will be

² It should be noted that race is not simply skin color. Skin color is not the sole, phenotypic signifier of one's race or ethnicity, though it has become a cultural common sense to conflate the concepts. See Appendix A for a full list of definitions for the terms race, ethnicity and skin color.

those posed initially by my introduction and research question: assimilation, racial and ethnic identity, being an American, and whiteness.³ I will be using theories and literature from previous chapters to better explain these observations and patterns. Chapter 8 will conclude with a brief summary of the research question's answers, whilst posing questions that remain necessary and unanswered about the Arab American community and its identity formation.

There is a stake in researching and learning about the ways Arab Americans are racialized as an "other," primarily through the use of religion:

One of the main themes in these writings is that Arab Americans are caught between two contradictory processes: racialization, through increasingly vehement stereotypes of the Arab as the quintessential "other" to a "white American mainstream," and, simultaneously, their invisibility as part of the white racial category⁴ Research indicates that religion plays the most dominant role in racializing this community, and this is worth investigating, as there are concrete manifestations in discriminatory policy, and media representations. There is a connection to be made between the concept of whiteness, as I will define it, and the "othering" process that has been occurring to Arab Americans racially. Arab Americans have long straddle the line between a legal affirmation of their groups as white, and the realities that they experience in reality as far from the social privileges of whiteness, rather aligning with experiences of an "other." The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) population is comprised of ethnically diverse individuals, but I am interested in those who also identify as Muslim, and the ways that their self definitions affect their life trajectory, economic opportunities, social mobility and more. I acknowledge that race may not be the most central piece of the identity puzzle, but I believe that it inarticulately underlies and may be conflated with Arab Americans' idea of "America" or becoming an "American." Although the central

³ Depending on data from the interviews, these themes are liable to slight alterations.

⁴ Sawsan Abdulrahim et al., "Discrimination and Psychological Distress: Does Whiteness Matter for Arab Americans?," *Social Science & Medicine*, Part Special Issue: Place, migration & health, 75, no. 12 (December 1, 2012): 2116–23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.07.030>.

binary within discussions of identity amongst Arab Americans may not be that of black and white, from personal experience, and numerous studies I have read, some notion of occupying a white and/or American identity continue to form one side of the binary against Arab or Muslim. To investigate whiteness as it pertains to the Arab American community is doubly significant in that it allows for the exploration of its opposite, blackness, which in turn leads us to confront the racist undertones that line this community against their own black members.

Historical Context

In this country today, Arab Americans make up about 3.5 million of the population, occupying heterogeneous socioeconomic strata, educational attainment levels, and ethnic identifications. This ethnic group is said to somewhat occupy the status of a model minority through its steadfast attainment of citizenship and adherence to the American ethos of meritocracy and wealth accumulation. But, despite the suggestion of Census Bureau data, which in and of itself is incomplete in its registration of exact amounts of MENA Americans, broad swaths of the Arab American population today are at high risk of poverty, and show lower rates of home ownership than their non-Arab counterparts. There is a 16.7% chance for poverty, compared to a 12.4% for non-Arabs; the rate increases to 22% for Arab youth. Country of origin seems to play a significant role in altering levels of education, home ownership and more.⁵⁶

The general and most researched narratives of Arab American immigration begin with an initial wave of migrants in the early 19th century, with latter surges extending into the late 20th century. However, there is evidence, but ample research, that suggests there has been an even earlier Arab and/or Arab Muslim slaves presence in this country, dating back to about 1450. The

⁵ Michael W. Suleiman, "The Arab Community in the United States: A Review and an Assessment of the State of Research and Writing on Arab Americans," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2010): 39–55.

⁶ More demographic information regarding wealth, poverty, education, marriage, family structures and more to come.

naturalization processes that arose from these waves of immigration have heavily shaped the ideologies and categories now associated with the MENA community, most notably the citizenship afforded to those who could prove a legitimate “whiteness.” The early wave, or what I will refer to as Wave 0, consisted primarily of Arabs from the Mount Lebanon and Levant region, which included Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, as well as Jordan and Iraq. These groups arrived in the early 19th century, particularly the 1880s, and were .⁷ These Arabic speaking groups were federally classified alongside “other Ottoman subjects as originating from Turkey in Asia;” some years later in 1899 these immigrants were *all* classified as Syrians. It was only after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rising national identities of Arab countries in the 1900s that led to an awareness of who was “Arab.”⁸ These waves can also be classified as pre- and post- World War II; the pre World War II saw the emigration of largely “unsophisticated village farmers or artisans” who were minimally schooled, whereas the post World War II wave brought to America an actively Arab identifying group of “educated, bilingual, politicized, and nationalistic emigrants.”⁹ The post World War II surge of immigration came in the wake of the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which ended immigration quotas and preferences for European immigrants only. This spiked a more diverse flow of Arabs, now including North Africans and other Middle Easterners. Rough estimates of immigration levels indicate about 100,000 Arabic speaking migrants arrived before World War II, with the amount almost doubling after World War II to about 250,000 Arab immigrants.¹⁰ Other studies of the rather unstable and uncertain data regarding this demographic indicated that the first wave of

⁷ Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfpsf>.

⁸ Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfpsf>.

⁹ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

immigrants was largely composed of Christian Syrians and other Ottoman subjects. This is important to note when considering the study of Arab American identity, as for some time after arrival to the United States, Syrians and Lebanese populations conceptualized themselves as Ottoman citizens and subjects. They perceived themselves to be Ottoman subjects first, with nationalities emerging only after independence from this empire, and the creations and naming of nations like Lebanon and Syria.

For some time after the naturalization of several Arab individuals as legally White, MENA communities and members served as “marginal whites” or occupied a “marginal whiteness,” meaning they were considered white only as much as they affirmed core values of whiteness as I define them: English language proficiency, American citizenship, and the checking off the “white box” on racial documents. For decades after their arrival to the US, initial waves of Arab immigrants were perceived as a threat and nuisance by the Europeans around them: “They were considered an inconvenience at best and a threat to the purity of the white race and US moral and public order at worst.”¹¹ For this reason, some portions of these Arab immigrants “... ‘Americanized’ their names, shed many traditions, and became a largely invisible minority group...”¹² Those who undertook such actions were the Muslim Arabs, as this group, due to the foreign, almost “Oriental” perception of Islam, was deemed to be the largest threat, in comparison to their Christian counterparts.¹³ According to varying studies in the 80s, ethnic Arabs constituted almost half of the total population of Muslims in the United States,

¹¹ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹² Andrzej Kulczycki and Arun Peter Lobo, “Deepening the Melting Pot: Arab-Americans at the Turn of the Century,” *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 3 (2001): 459–73.

¹³ Andrzej Kulczycki and Arun Peter Lobo, “Deepening the Melting Pot: Arab-Americans at the Turn of the Century,” *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 3 (2001): 459–73.

which was estimated to be about 1.2 million.¹⁴ Thus, Muslims remain a significant proportion of the Arabs present in America today.

Literature Review:

Assimilation and Acculturation

Literature pertaining to new immigrant and ethnic groups often equate theories of assimilation to "fitting in." Acclimating is akin to being absorbed as one by the host society. It is worth noting that there are significant differences in the implications of the terms assimilation and acculturation. These terms, although similar in their application to immigrant populations, do: "... assimilation implies total absorption of one culture into another (usually the dominant majority culture absorbs the dominated minority one), but acculturation suggests that one culture, selectively it is presumed, takes on chosen aspects of another culture while retaining its integrity."¹⁵ Acculturation theories and definitions take into account the cultural components which change, or do not change, through the immigration and immigrant's experience, whereas theories on assimilation tend to more deeply explore other facets of the immigrant experience, especially social and economic mobility and political participation. The concept of segmented assimilation is equally as important, implying a fragmented sense of integration by the immigrant into their host society, and perhaps a balancing of two opposing identities simultaneously. Moreover, assimilation led the first wave of Arab immigrants to largely abandon their associations with their homelands and adopt an American stance on issues related to their native Ottoman empire, meaning they began to align themselves with an anti-Ottoman view of World War I.¹⁶ Research by Huseby Darvas states that assimilation is akin to conformity to

¹⁴ Andrzej Kulczycki and Arun Peter Lobo, "Deepening the Melting Pot: Arab-Americans at the Turn of the Century," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 3 (2001): 459–73.

¹⁵ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Anglo-Saxan ideals and *language*. Language remains a key ascriptive characteristic that immigrants and natives cite as key to assimilation, specifically the English language in the case of this research paper. Studies time and time again indicate that that the assimilation process hinges on acquiring English language proficiency, alongside other traditionally Anglo-Saxan traits, like wealth accumulation and other middle class symbols:

Proponents of Anglo-saxan conformity assumed an inherent superiority in the English language and in traditional Anglo-Saxan Protestant culture and institutions... the result of the process [assimilation] would be the eventual disappearance of strange foreign customs; the enthusiast adherence to Anglo-Saxan traditions; and total acceptance of the assimilated immigrants and their offspring by the host society”¹⁷ (Huseby-Darvas 16, 1994).

Hence, it becomes clear that assimilation theories generally speak of an integration of new immigrant and ethnic groups into a traditionally Anglo-Saxan and Protestant culture and sphere of life. This includes speaking English, and most likely practicing a Christian faith, whilst adhering to other customs, like traditions of meritocracy and wealth accumulation. It is worth considering how much of assimilation theory echoes literature on how said groups define being an American, or being White. Another foundational value to being American is individualism, and studies suggest new immigrant groups, like Arabs, are found struggling to reconcile a native culture of collectivity against the strictly individualistic narratives of the USA:

When young adolescents from cultures that place a high value on family loyalty come to the U.S. and try to adapt to the majority culture, they often have difficulties adjusting to the emphasis that Americans place on individual competence and competition (Eisenbruch, 1988; Ascher, 1989).¹⁸

¹⁷ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Tami Craft Al-Hazza and Katherine T. Bucher, “Bridging a Cultural Divide with Literature about Arabs and Arab Americans,” *Middle School Journal* 41, no. 3 (2010): 4–11.

This is one instance in which cultures clash in an attempt to assimilate one ethnic identity into another. This question of immigrant versus American identity will be further explored in my following section on identity and becoming “American.”

As groups assimilate over time and over generations, they come to occupy a specific space in American society, most often, if generally accepted by the host country and its culture, becoming a model minority group: “...the term ‘model minority’ to refer to a racial-ethnic status in which group members find acceptance from white America by proving that they are model American citizens, and ideal that he argues is dictated by the American state.”¹⁹ Becoming a model and assimilated minority heavily relies on an acceptable perception of this group by “the American state” and society. To prove this, minorities must actively participate in American institutions and ideals, similarly affirming an authentic American culture: “Cultural authenticity, by supporting an accumulation of wealth through hard work and an avoidance of associations with the decolonizing and anti-imperialist political movements...”²⁰ Said proving of an immigrant group’s American cultural authenticity, as meritocracy and patriotism suggests, becomes parallel to the proving of an immigrant group’s proximity to the ideals of *whiteness*. This is not to say that immigrants willingly abandon their roots in a one dimensional attempt to adhere to the framework of being an American citizen. But, many studies do suggest that to an extent, immigrants are implicitly given legal and social incentive for better adhering to normative whiteness. And in the Arab American case, this process of assimilation is functioning on a backward trajectory, meaning that in recent times, the Arab American diaspora finds itself

¹⁹ Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfjpsf>.

²⁰ Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfjpsf>.

increasingly distanced from American society, socially, economically and politically.²¹ Whereas initial waves of immigrants who assimilated and cemented a presence for Arab Americans were largely *Christians*, more recent waves were and continue to be largely Muslim-- numerous studies suggest that this is a key factor, though not the only factor, in this growing distance and differentiating.

Although religion, specifically Islam, largely contributes to the segmented assimilation that MENA groups experience today, religion functions in conversation with other forces that then shape the assimilation process, or lack thereof: “It is not clear that the American public has a differentiated view of the Christian versus the Muslim Arab; the utter simplicity of monolithic, anti-Arab messages has succeeded in precluding thoughtful distinctions.”²² It seems as though assimilation has been predicated, especially in recent years, by a monolithic conception of what it means to be Arab by the American public. This conception has been bolstered by the news, public policy, popular culture, and more. Essentially, this process of monolithic meaning creation is defined as the creation of a “racial project;” Omi and Winant’s theory provides another potential perspective to comprehend the process of assimilation for Arab Americans:

... social constructions of the essential differences of Arabs (and later Muslims) have been put forth so extensively as to become widely accepted as common sense, as evidenced in public opinion polls.²³

So, the Arab racial project is created through an essentializing of Arabs, and eventually Muslims, as innately different from Americans and Anglosaxans. This assertion becomes legitimized through the use of the aforementioned methods of dissemination, and thus becomes a standard of knowledge, a truth and common sense about this group of people. This same definition can be

²¹ Louise Cainkar, “The Social Construction of Difference and the Arab American Experience,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2/3 (2006): 243–78.

²² Louise Cainkar, “The Social Construction of Difference and the Arab American Experience,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2/3 (2006): 243–78.

²³ Louise Cainkar, “The Social Construction of Difference and the Arab American Experience,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2/3 (2006): 243–78.

applied to whiteness, which appears to be the ultimate position of control regarding the creation of other racial projects: "... 'being white' in a racially hierarchical society implies possessing control over how others place you within that hierarchy."²⁴ Images of violence in particular are used to uphold these narratives, which then shape the racilizing of this group as an "other."

Identity: Whiteness, Religion, Ethnicity, Race, and the becoming American

Identity, in the plainest degree of the term, is a sense of self. Simply put, identity is how one defines themselves. This self-identification comes in a myriad of forms, and is often a compilation and intersection of infinite variables, from gender to race to class: "Identity, or the sense of self, is social and relational: our sense of who we are depends on and is the consequence of belonging to a society and participating in its culture."²⁵ Furthermore, identity and its development are an "interplay with race, ethnicity and religion," all of which are factors integral to Arab American immigrants and second-generation identity formation.²⁶ When it comes to Arab American identity, the variables that arguably contribute most to their social and relational selves are religion and race; race for this demographic comes to uniquely take on religion, as MENA individuals come to be racilized as an outlandish "other" through their association with Islam, a religion dubbed backwards and unmodern by politicians, media, and much Orientalist literature. Being an Arab is more often than not conflated with being Muslim, and the negative attributes ascribed to Islam thus come to represent the qualities of being an Arab: "... unless proved to be 'good,' every Muslim is presumed to be 'bad.'"²⁷ There is an innate sense of immorality and "bad" ascribed to Islam, especially post 9/11, when the words Islam and Arab

²⁴ Moustafa Bayoumi, "The Race Is On:: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination," in *This Muslim American Life*, Dispatches from the War on Terror (NYU Press, 2015), 185–209, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15zc812.18>.

²⁵ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

²⁶ Al-Hazza and Bucher, "Bridging a Cultural Divide with Literature about Arabs and Arab Americans."

²⁷ Bayoumi, "The Race Is On."

became household terms in America's culture of perpetual war against a foreign enemy. No amount of aligning oneself against the "bad Muslims" can undo. In this way, Arab American identity becomes racialized.

Before embarking on deeper analysis, I would like to briefly define the concepts of race and ethnicity, as they will be used frequently in this section and beyond. Race is socially constructed, meaning, race is "an unstable complex of social meanings attached to human bodies..."²⁸ Furthermore, race defies phenotype and the color of one's skin; more importantly, it is "...an interactionally accomplished category, enacted through the multiple ways that individuals and groups negotiate identities as they encounter others on either micro or macro levels."²⁹ Thus, a white race, and the concept of whiteness, emerge simultaneously from the relationship between individual identification and one's skin tone and one's interactions with other groups and institutions that create a culture of ascribed meaning to ideas, appearances and actions as "white." Following this set of definitions on race, MENA communities become racialized as an other through the meanings ascribed to the culture of Islam, whilst laws continue to legitimize this status as an other *and* as an invisible member of Whites and whiteness. Ethnicity, although similar to race, is defined through its "attributional dimensions... like language, descent, etc."³⁰ Ethnicity is an identity defined through "mores, habits and rites," essentially making up the culture of an individual.

²⁸ Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, 1st ed, Arab American Writing (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

²⁹ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

³⁰ Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, 1st ed, Arab American Writing (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

However, a racial identity in regards to Arab Americans is tricky in its historical roots in degrees of whiteness. Naturalization laws that granted citizenship to any ethnic immigrant groups in the early 20th century mandated a social and relational white identity:

Immigration policy in the U.S. historically employed whiteness as a precondition for citizenship (Gaultieri, 2001; Hale, 2002), and so the saliency of race to adaptation among immigrants is a deep-rooted phenomenon that implicitly organizes the migrant experience.³¹

A further analysis of immigration policies from this period indicate that not only legal citizenship, but by default, the process of becoming an American, undoubtedly hinged upon an immigrant's ability to embody and exist within a racially white space, with the proceeding step being to fully acclimate into the social privileges afforded by whiteness. A proximity to whiteness became necessary for Arabs to occupy, explaining their vehement rejection of Islam at This paradigm of identity is integral to my research, seeing as it explains the reason why a majority of Arab Americans have historically affirmed and attempted to prolong a racially white identity in an attempt to better reach the subsequent privileges of social, economic and political power granted by whiteness: "On the other hand, immigrants who benefit from the U.S. racial classification system by being labeled White may embrace that identity."³² It would be a failure in research and analysis to attempt to discuss the identity of Arab Americans today and in the past without an analysis and understanding of the symbiotic relationship between whiteness and American-ness, which in turn contributes to a deeper critique of citizenship and racial classification practices as they pertain to this demographic and more generally, plenty of other ethnic groups.

³¹ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

³² Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

Based on current research, there is a surprising awareness amongst foreign born immigrant groups of the whiteness inherent to being an American, despite an acquisition of citizenship or becoming a naturalized American. Often, this whiteness is coded into and conflated with a foreign born and/or immigrant view of Americans and American-ness:

This linking of American identity to a set of ascriptive characteristics privileging whiteness leads to an implicit (and sometimes explicit) ranking of the U.S. born over the foreign born, U.S. citizens over noncitizens, and European immigrants over their non-European counterparts.³³

Americans, and thus Whites, inherit a privilege simply by being of European descent; this is the ascriptive nature of social privilege and whiteness that is written onto American citizenship and all things pertaining to becoming an American, including nativity and immigration status. In the way I employ the term whiteness, being an American citizen *and* someone of European descent are integral to building the foundation for social capital accrued in whiteness. To reach this American identity, in the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant sense of the term, has historically been the goal of initial waves and generations of immigrant groups, explaining why generations of Arab Americans, when given a White legal standing, attempted to assimilate into and preserve their whiteness for as long as possible. It is only in recent studies of newer generations of Arab Americans that the pattern of rejecting whiteness and affirming an Arab or Muslim identity has come to prevail as the ethnic group's ultimate goal. This can be theoretically described as a process of "reactive ethnicity:" "Reactive ethnicity is consistent with a psychological process of rejection-identification, when perceptions of prejudice lead to hostility toward the dominant group and identification with the minority group."³⁴ The MENA demographic has come to be

³³ Michael Jones-Correa et al., "Immigrant Perceptions of U.S.-Born Receptivity and the Shaping of American Identity," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 47–80, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.03>.

³⁴ Cynthia Feliciano and Rubén G. Rumbaut, "Varieties of Ethnic Self-Identities: Children of Immigrants in Middle Adulthood," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 26–46, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.02>.

more conscious of their position as an other, due to being marginalized at the cost of their Muslim faith and stereotyped by phenotypic markers, like olive skin or a head scarf. This has led to the observed pattern of *rejecting* a White racial identification, as well as a distancing from the ideals of whiteness as a concept, and an acceptance of “Arab,” or even more broadly, “Middle Eastern” as their a racial identification group, albeit Middle Eastern does not include nor does it speak for the identities and experiences of North Africans.

Race is an integral piece of the identity puzzle when it comes to immigrant identity formation. It should be noted that Arab Americans display heterogeneous patterns with regards to racial classification; although many today and historically have rejected the White category and aligned with a non-White identity, generations of Arabs accepted and aligned themselves with a White racial standing, even when the legal ramifications for affirming said identity fell away. Moreover, the relationship between the concept of whiteness, a White racial category, and minority groups is not simply a negative linear relationship, as most theories and studies have posited. Although whiteness and occupants of the White racial category remain at the center of normativity and the standard for racial identity, some minority groups, Arab Americans included, find success in adhering to facets of whiteness, and with this, are allotted certain social advantages. Some minority groups are even able to surpass Whites on this scale of normativity:

Whites occupy the heart of this normal distribution and, in a country that exalts the middle class and majoritarian politics, find great advantage in claiming the center. Minority groups that fare worse than whites are relegated to one tapering tail, and those that surpass whites in some way are relegated to the other.³⁵

An equally as relevant but under researched component of emerging immigrant identity is religion. This variable is especially relevant to my research, seeing as Arab Americans have been predominantly Muslim, directly flowing against the grain of Protestant and Christian practices

³⁵ Michael Morris, “Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity,” *California Law Review* 104, no. 4 (2016): 949–78.

long assigned to being an American: "... religious affiliation shapes how the host country views the immigrant as well as how the immigrant views him/herself."³⁶ Despite the fact that initial waves were mostly composed of Christians, Arab Americans today remain largely Muslim. Depending on the individuals' affirmation, acceptance and practice of Islam, their position within the frames of whiteness remains precarious and partially dependent on a rejection of overt Muslim practices and faith. This explains the means through which earlier waves of Arabs began to assimilate, legally and socially, as they were "able to actively claim 'whiteness' in part through references to their Christian faith."³⁷

*Methodology: Interviews and Snowball Sampling*³⁸

To recruit participants, I will employ several methods. First, I will be reaching out to community organizations in NYC myself via email and/or telephone with a request and explanation of my process. I believe these will be most fruitful in yielding young, Muslim and Arab individuals born of immigrant parents. I will be emailing the Arab American Association of New York and The Muslim American Society of Queens, a mosque and community center long established in Astoria. I attended the latter for Arabic and Islam lessons as a little girl, though I do not maintain any personal connections with the organization today, nor do I have specific contacts or connections I will be employing from my personal life. Both of these organizations, on a citywide, or boroughwide scale, provide support for the Arab and/or Muslim communities of New York City. They allow for education of the youth, community events and service, as well as a space for these Arab American networks to form and grow, particularly networks of young,

³⁶ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

³⁷ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

³⁸ See Appendix B for list of survey questions.

second generation Arab Americans, whose parents also seek solace in other adults from their home countries who have recently immigrated.

Both organizations will be reached directly by me via their communications address electronically to request the recruitment of members of their organizations who fit my descriptions, and who consent to thirty minute interviews with me regarding my research. If I receive names and contact information after an agreement from the organization to disseminate my request, I will then directly communicate with the recruited participants digitally, and explain, in an email, why they are being reached out to, asking for their permission to participate in an online interview via Zoom. Once expectations are fully explained via email, and should they agree to participate, I will reiterate these expectations at the start of the interview, and debrief them on my study and questions, whilst forwarding them electronic consent forms to be filled out and sent to me. Interviews will be the leading method for gathering data due to the ability and freedom for intimacy and truth. I believe in a conversation, where I may be able to pose follow up and other questions, I will get the best understanding of my participants' life story. The human connection and conversation will prevail with the most meaningful answers as well.

The other method I will employ will be snowball sampling through the use of my personal social media, particularly Instagram, and potentially Facebook. I have weak social ties to second generation Muslim Arabs from over the years of my schooling by the Muslim American Society, and from family friends in Astoria. These ties are mostly maintained through social media interaction. On my profiles, I will first write a simple, short post explaining that I will be conducting senior thesis research on second generation Arab Muslim identity formation in New York City. The demographic will be clearly explained in the post, so that only individuals

who fit the demographic respond. Should someone reply to this post in the form of a message or comment, either nominating themselves or other people they know, I will ask for their email, and forward them a consent email that more thoroughly explains my project and requests their agreement for participation. If an agreement is reached, interviews will be conducted in the same manner as detailed above-- in a private Zoom chat room, with consent forms digitally filled out and forwarded to me. In both cases, once the interviews are concluded, a follow up email will be sent thanking the participants for their contributions and times, and encouraging them to share the message with individuals they know fit the demographic requirements.

Chapter 1: To Be an American...

“... My parents have set a line between themselves and, like, American culture because they stereotype it in a way that’s like ‘Oh, Americans just wanna have fun. They have no kind of religious limit, in a way, or no kind of social limit.’ You can just, like, completely do whatever you want, whenever you want, [with] no attachment to family and so on and so forth.” -Khalid, 20

Khalid, and his older brother Ali, like the majority of other participants in my study, are college students, just beginning to consider an early adulthood life. Ali will be graduating in a year, and thrown into the throes of opportune uncertainty, to be what he wants to be. The life he chooses, whether that be college major, post graduate occupation, or long term romantic partner and relationship, he made clear, will be defined by the values and standards he considers solely his own. This is an effort to more clearly assert an identity and a being separate from the one that, up until his early teenage years, was heavily molded like clay into an according shape by his parents. I got the chance to interview both Khalid and Ali, who attend the same university, and share similar beliefs on forging a life for themselves. The older, a male cheerleader, is pursuing a career in physical therapy as an extension of his passion for the sport. Both men are a product of the North African diaspora of Astoria, New York, born to two Egyptian immigrants; their father has been a cab driver for several decades, and in that same time period, their mother existed almost entirely as a stay at home caretaker and head of domestic household. For most of their lives, the brothers have juggled periods of time and chunks of schooling in Egypt, with periodic returns to Astoria, when deemed appropriate by their father. Both grew up in a household that spoke Arabic, and privileged the “proper” practice of Islam. These polarized languages, values, and practices have come to a head in Khalid and Ali’s early twenties, as is the case for many

second generation immigrants contemplating their identity: How do they reconcile their upbringing, their parents, and their family, with who they are and what they do today? Alongside this question is the integral comparison that my second generation participants repeatedly draw between themselves and their first generation parents. This comparison becomes a guiding principle in my research on understanding what exactly it means to be an American.

Khalid and Ali share a similar definition of what it means to be an American. Simply put, they see themselves as Americans; their parents, little blue passport and American citizenship aside, are not. When asked to summarize their cultural background (ideals, values, language, etc.), Ali's answer proved similar to his brother's:

Khalid: The way that I think of it, my parents have set a line between themselves and, like, American culture because they stereotype it in a way that is like 'Oh, Americans just wanna have fun. They have no kind of religious limit, in a way, or no kind of social limit.'

Ali: I was born into an Egyptian Muslim family. Both of my parents are immigrants. They came to America with not a whole lot of education, really. My dad had two years of college and he finished the other two years much later. My mom was a PE teacher in Egypt when they flew over. And a lot of what I grew up with was just their old traditional values, and their old school values... um primarily the values of Islam because that was their background.

The answers I received from Ali and Khalid highlight the extent to which religion undercuts definitions of culture and informs distinct, binary value sets. Both brothers understand their parents' values' as having been steeped in the Islam taught to them in Egypt; this is the "old school" or "old traditional" culture that surrounded them in their home and formed a large part of their upbringing. And so, American values come to be framed through a proximity to, or rather, distance from, this set of religious values. Khalid especially expresses this in the way he explains his parents' perception of Americans having "no religious limits." A binary of the Arab and the American continues to be perpetuated through the relationship of identity to religion, and becomes more clear the implicit foundation which religion forms in defining culture.

This binary begged the question: Did Ali and Khalid consider themselves American?

How about their parents? Upon asking Ali, I learned the following:

Ali: The qualifying feature for me was just an American passport... so yes... Do I consider my parents culturally American? Not even close. No, nothing. Nothing at all in terms of being American. Uh, myself... yea, yea I'm American...

A similar sentiment regarding their parent's identity as "real Americans" was shared by practically all my interviewees. In a nutshell, participants' parents were not identified as real Americans, albeit all participants considered *themselves* Americans through and through, save for a handful of nuanced, grey spaced identifications. A disconnect exists, especially for Ali and Khalid, between their parents' American identity on "paper," or rather, their identity as a result of being legal citizens with explicit citizenship and a passport, and their "cultural American" identity, which they are believed to not have in any degree. Citizenship as a legal entity and institution serves as the only validation for Ali and Khalid that the label of "American" should be applied to their parents. They both went so far as to suggest, in their descriptions of their parents' vehement, self imposed blockade against cultural incorporation, that activities associated with citizenship in citizenship literature, like community engagement and spoken language, are minimally practiced by their parents.

As Khalid told me, they seemed to "draw a line between themselves and American culture." In this case, the children of rather strictly practicing Muslims, from Egypt, have somewhat recreated the Arab-American binary. In placing themselves on one end as culturally "open" Americans, they leave behind the aspects of culture, ethnicity and religion that they feel go against this openness. This process of ethnic self identity can be defined as "identificational assimilation," which is reliant on a "development of a sense of peoplehood based exclusively on

the host society.”³⁹ This pattern of incorporation effectively perpetuates the distance often presumed to be the goal in theories of assimilation and acculturation, as less and less of the mother ideals and practices exist. For Ali and Khalid, ethnic boundaries melt away into majority group resemblance and integration, as is their desire and clear intent. Though this supports the more conventional theories of assimilation, it was not the only pattern visible among my participants. Some seemed to implicitly align themselves more closely with facets of their ethnic and religious identity, retaining their roots in certain social realms while adopting their “American” side in others: “... Studies find that ethnic minorities often use multiple labels in different situations, and that panethnic identities are often overlapping rather than distinct identities.”⁴⁰ In my study, the panethnic identity most observed was “Middle Eastern” or “North African;” these terms were often used interchangeably by my participants, regardless of which region they were from. A self-declaration of ethnic identity, based on degrees of perceived assimilation, differed across my participants. But for Ali and Khalid, it was clear that their self imposed label of American only invisibly had the word “Egyptian” tied to it. They had long made the choice to interact with only a small selection of characteristics specific to their being Egyptian, like speaking the language and interacting with family overseas. And this, in and of itself, relied in large part on the social space they occupied: university or Astoria, Egypt or America, home or not home. ⁴¹

³⁹ Cynthia Feliciano and Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Varieties of Ethnic Self-Identities: Children of Immigrants in Middle Adulthood,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 26–46, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.02>, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.02>. (27)

⁴⁰ Cynthia Feliciano and Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Varieties of Ethnic Self-Identities: Children of Immigrants in Middle Adulthood,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 26–46, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.02>. (28)

⁴¹ Although the term assimilation was not employed by my interlocuteurs explicitly, only in my posing of specific questions, the perceived ideals of assimilatory practices and expectations have been internalized by these participants.

The Boundaries of Openness: Americans vs. Arabs

Every one of my participants continues to self identify as “open.” This is a key factor in framing who they are today, in the spaces they occupy today: college campuses, social gatherings, former local neighborhoods. Male or female, North African or Middle Eastern, the individuals I spoke to, regardless of their relationship and ties to Islam or “Arabness,” proclaim themselves to be open and willing to engage with peoples, concepts and ideas of differing backgrounds. This is being an American to them; this is also the more contemporary rhetoric surrounding what it means to “be American:” “Contemporary American culture embraces a mild form of multiculturalism that celebrates symbolic identities, but groups are expected to shed their ethnic attachments and identify as Americans.”⁴² Despite the implicit expectation of shedding any ethnic attachments to most fully embody being an American, the concepts diversity and mild acceptance remain core stabilizers for the nationality. The term “open” takes on new attachments when used to describe their parents’ conception of being American. “Open” becomes a morally charged indicator of minimal ethics and a lack of “shame.” Americans and American culture become framed as monoliths of weak moral standing; America has a culture with “no limits,” as several participants noted.

Layla, a 21 year old Algerian, American, also from Astoria, New York, detailed to me what being an American meant to her:

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself an American?

Layla: I do and I don't. I feel like I'm an American on paper. but in my day to day life, I wouldn't necessarily associate as American. Even though I was born here, if I see someone doing something out of my ordinary, I would say to my mom 'Wa hadik mericania' (Darija, Algerian dialect, meaning: "Oh, she's an American). So I wouldn't consider myself American- American, although I was born and raised here. When people ask me 'Oh, where are you from?' I never mention the fact that I was born and raised here.

⁴² José Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines: Race, Class, and the Dominican Experience in Providence* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447591>.

The first thing I say is 'I'm Algerian.' People think you have to be from somewhere just because you're born there.

Layla provides an interesting case for the diversity of assimilatory practices and self-identifications. As opposed to the affirmation of American-ness by Ali and Khalid, Layla experiences a reverse affirmation of self, aligning more closely with her native nationality, culture and religion. Although addressing the fact her citizenship is legally American, and that she was born here, she states what has often been said about first generation MENA immigrants by their children: "I'm an American on paper." The way she speaks about Americans is through *darija*, an Arabic dialect spoken primarily in Morocco and Algeria, as well as other parts of North Africa. She reiterates her distance from Americanness in spoken *darija*, describing the way she classifies "Americans" or American behaviour by saying: "*Wa hadik mericania*," which translates to "Oh, she's an American," and is a phrase inflected with hidden tones of difference, and dynamics of superiority and inferiority. Despite her more blended identity and approach to being an American, she was clear that her parents were not:

Interviewer: Do you consider your parents Americans?

Layla: 100% not. No, not at all. My dad kind of lived like an American when he first came here at 17, considering he came single and alone and stuff. But would I consider them American? No. They try to do as much as possible to keep us in touch with our roots, especially when we were younger. They never had that mindset of like 'Oh it's normal, we're here in America, Americans do that.'

Interviewer: How would you define what it means to be a full, or "true" American?

Layla: Personally, I feel as if being an authentic American is really just being super, super open minded with your parents and with your family. I barely and rarely know any Arabs, even Christian Arabs, I really don't know any of them who are way too open in their household. I feel as if being American is just basically... I feel like it's like having no limits in a way.

Observe the repetition of certain phrases: "super, super open minded," "way too open in their household," and "it's like having no limits in a way." There is explicit emphasis placed on openness-- being as open as an American means an exaggerated sense of transparency with your

family members. This comes to take on an almost derogatory view on “openness;” there are no morals and self-limits, further implying no respect. These descriptors comment on the hidden binaries weaved into self identification, and more generally, a sense of an Arab American Muslim self. Layla exhibits a more transnational approach to her relationship with America and identifying as an American. Dependent on situation and space, Layla retains and presents her Algerian roots as her primary identity, an example of social group commitment and attachment. She addresses the importance of being born in America, and the way it remains integral to perceptions of her present identity. Yet, there are clear distinctions made between herself and other “true Americans,” who she defines as lacking in boundary defined relationships within the home. The lack of limits is particularly shocking in its application to *familial* relations, implying the existence of a set of strict, formal yet informal, rules present in Muslim-Arab household relations that crumble away in American households. Transparency and overtness come to define the American family, creating another strict binary between the more rigid, “respect” and “limit” ridden relations of my participants to their parents and family.

When talking to Fatima, 20, a student at Yale University whose parents are originally from Morocco, there was a similar, yet intrinsically different approach to the concept of an American identity. Also from Astoria, New York, Fatima echoed and contradicted sentiments presented by Layla, especially in her relationship to identifying as an American. Where Layla describes an American culture and identity through a critical lens, especially aforementioned ideals of “openness” representing a certain moral reprehensibility about American families, there is an affirmation of American openness by Fatima in her views on freedom:

Interviewer: How relevant do you believe your parents’ “immigrant experience” is to your identity? Would you classify your identity as “immigrant?”

Fatima: I feel, like, extremely relevant... just because ... I feel like parents' immigrant identity shapes the first child, the first born's life a lot more than the other children, just in my experience. I feel like I'm a little more conscious of everything.

Yea [I would classify my identity as immigrant]. Even though at the same time, I do consider myself an American. I know for a fact if I were given the choice to go and live in Morocco, I could not do that. Yea, I know I'm Moroccan and I speak the language and I have no problem being around my family. It's just a different lifestyle and ideals. I can't do whatever I want. And here I have the option and the freedom to do that.

As the oldest child, Fatima was especially aware of her parents' circumstances and history-- she later described this "self consciousness of everything" as being one centered in keeping more in touch with family overseas, being to speak the language more fluently, and overall, simply being more aware of where she comes from, in a way she did not see present in her younger brother. Layla, who in her day to day, speaks the language of her family and is comfortable with the culture and atmosphere of her native roots ("I do speak Arabic fluently. I'm conversational in French... My family is pretty traditional... we pretty much try to stay in touch with our roots as much as possible when it comes to holidays, the shows we watch at home with our parents, the lifestyle, the food that we eat..."); as we have come to understand, this culture and Algerian identity is of utmost importance, eclipsing her identification with America in any capacity beyond this country being her birthplace. Fatima echoes many of these sentiments in her affirmation of Moroccan ideals. She too speaks the language, and has the primary role of maintaining overseas and domestic familial ties, with ease and comfort. Though she does not employ the term "open," her spoken negation ("I can't do whatever I want... I could not do that...") places emphasis on the ability to exist in America, as an American, with "options," and "freedom." She displays a greater attachment to being an American than her fellow participant, despite their extremely proximal cultures, countries of origins and upbringings.

Layla and Fatima, whether explicitly or implicitly, described their alignment with the immigrant experience. They, and other participants, touched on the unmistakable influence that

their parents' immigration narratives, in most cases including hardships, forms of discrimination, and, in extreme cases, violence, has had on their identification processes today. Mo is of the interviewees whose assimilatory trajectory has been most influenced by processes of exile *and* immigration. A 21 year old Sociology and Psychology student at Franklin and Marshall University, and originally born and raised in the Philadelphia area, he has had to reckon with the conflicting puzzle pieces that make him who he is today. His family is originally Palestinian, and were exiled to Syria as a result of the 1945-1948 Arab-Israeli conflict and eventually, War. For Palestinians, the events of 1948 were a catastrophe that reverberated through the sense of self of generations to come: "In the *nakba* (catastrophe; the Palestinian term for the experiences of 1948) palestinians not only lost their homes and lands, they lost this [Palestinian citizenship] status."⁴³ This history remains integral to Mo and his family, inescapable and formative in establishing the importance of concepts like citizenship and belonging. He considers himself to be both Palestinian and Syrian "at heart," as his family has maintained ties to both countries through language and practice of religion. Yet, Mo and his direct family have been unable to ever visit either nation again, further contributing to a ruptured national identity. He said the following when asked if he identified as American, and whether he considers his parents to be American:

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself an American?

Mo: Yes, I have to. It's the only reason why... I say yes because I am born here and I have had the experience of growing up here and being American, or whatever that is considered... At my heart, I don't consider myself as American as I do Palestinian and Syrian... Even though I haven't been able to visit the country, I cannot remove myself from the experience of being Palestinian.

Throughout the course of this section of Mo's interview, there is a thread of obligation steeped in legality: "I have to," "... because I am born here," Mo presents us with a juxtaposition of notions of identity formation, ones that are greatly influenced by his family's experience of

⁴³ Ilana Feldman, "Waiting for Palestine: Refracted Citizenship and Latent Sovereignty in Gaza," *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 5 (October 1, 2008): 447–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020802337816>.

loss in Palestine, especially a loss of citizenship, nationality, and land. On the one hand, we have legal definitions of citizenship and birthrights as markers of a national identity, ones steeped in the idea of a land and its boundaries and borders (as has been mentioned by Ali, Layla and the like.) On the other hand, we have a more sentimental notion of identity, one that is more an undefinable and uncontainable essence, rather than a legal clause or document. And for Mo, the latter is what takes precedence in his notions of his own identity, and that of his parents. His alignment, or rather, acknowledgement of American identity is a chore, one he feels obliged to admit to by virtue of legality. He continued:

Interviewer: Do you consider your parents Americans?

Mo: No. Um, I think they feel the same way I do. They aren't born here, so they aren't technically American. They aren't, like, believed to be American because they aren't born here, although they do have their citizenship now. For them, at heart, they feel that they are more Middle Eastern and Palestenian....

Interviewer: How would you define what it means to be a full or a real, or authentic, American?

Mo: I don't know if we can do that... I think in law or in political terms, to be born here or to have citizenship, whatever it may be, you're considered American...

Yet, the identity to which, technically speaking, he remains illegally bound to, and is an identity, that, to this day, remains undefined legally and stripped of all substance, is the identity he holds nearest and dearest: “at my heart,” “for them, at heart,” and “I have had the experience of growing up here.” For Mo, matters of identification through his and his family’s journey of incorporation remains a tender one. At his core, and in his heart, as he says, there is an indestructible embrace around his mother culture and country, Palestine, and even Syria, where his extended family lived in refuge. Even his register, in describing the extent of his “American-ness,” is far removed and clipped, speaking in a past tense, and in formal, vague language, as if “the experience of growing up here,” in America, is not truly his own, whereas he “cannot remove” himself from the “experience of being Palestenian.” It is not a matter of desire to be Palestenian, but rather an unceasing force that holds him together. This inversion of

citizenships further corroborated the importance of this tie; though he and his direct family are legal citizens in America, they still hold a stake in a legal and cultural citizenship to a country wherein citizenship, legally, has ceased to exist. It is clear, then, the remaining importance of legality and citizenship when considering one's incorporated identity, and the identity of their parents, especially for a participant like Mo.

The relationship between incorporation of immigrants and American cultural ideals, or legal American citizenship, like all my participants described above, is only one side of the story. Ali brought to my attention the way that layered constructions of Americanness, beyond a cultural sense of the term, can be understood through the lens of wealth and/or economic status and acquisition. Here is more of what Ali described when asked if he considers himself an American:

Ali: Uh, myself... yea, yea I'm American... but the American identity is so much more complex that when I think the word American, I don't think of that [American Passport] When I think of American it is someone whose grandparents grew up here, who owned property, who have, you know, stakes across the country, a private business, a house or a car or something.

Amongst other things, to be an American means to abide by attributes of economic wealth specific to what can be termed the "American middle class." Moreover, there is a generational factor, implying that an American identity, like the wealth amassed in its midst, is an inherited identity, passed down from a bloodline founded on this land. Ali's assertion holds true, especially as recent sociological and economic studies have discovered that there is a new "middle class," one that can be called the 9.9 percent, which lurks between the shadows of the 0.1 and the 90%, as an article by philosopher and scholar Matthew Stewart, titled "The 9.9 Percent is the New American Aristocracy," argued:

The meritocratic class has mastered the old trick of consolidating wealth and passing privilege along at the expense of other people's children... In between the top 0.1 percent and the bottom 90 percent is a group that has been doing just fine. It has held on to its

share of a growing pie decade after decade... You'll find the new aristocracy there. We are the 9.9 percent.⁴⁴

Stewart went on to state that a 2015 study concluded the wealth of a median white family in Boston was \$247,500, whereas the wealth of a median African American family was a whopping \$8. Eight whole dollars. Stewart's piece serves to solidify Ali's keen observation that American identity today, particularly a White American identity, remains connected to a specific amassing of wealth, and a generational continuity of wealth accumulation, and therefore, privilege accumulation. Our participants and their families may hold American passports and legal citizenship, as well as their own forms of wealth, but for Ali, there is a different value found in *private* business and property *ownership*. The numbers speak for themselves, and lead us to question whether anyone who is not a generational White American, particularly any new immigrant of color or immigrant of a disadvantaged background, can break into this "new aristocracy," or even make the mark for inclusion in the "other" 90%. Ali echoes much of the literature on the American ethos, while bringing our attention to the importance of history in planting the seeds of a physical and metaphorical American identity.

Approaches to Assimilation and Incorporation

Assimilation is a fluid process, and in this study, one that is both an *outcome* and *process*; it is not the sole lens through which I am analyzing the answers and experiences of my participants and their parents. Thus, assimilation is but one of several outcomes of *incorporation*, as participants may not necessarily aim at a full sense of the either term, but adopt segments of these processes. Assimilation can be an outcome in its reflection of "some convergence to a mean," and a process in its reflection of that "movement toward convergence to that mean."^{45,46}

⁴⁴ Story by Matthew Stewart, "The 9.9 Percent Is the New American Aristocracy," *The Atlantic*, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/the-birth-of-a-new-american-aristocracy/559130/>.

⁴⁵ Helen B. Morrow, "Assimilations in New Destinations," n.d.

⁴⁶ Helen B. Morrow, "Assimilations in New Destinations," n.d.

My approach considers assimilation a nuanced process, dependent on varying variables, like socioeconomic status, educational and linguistic attainment, etc., as well as sensitive to comparison groups. The cohort for this study is being compared to both their first generation, foreign born immigrant parents, and to a “mainstream reference group,” specifically native born Whites and Americans. With this understanding, my subjects’ testimonies to personal experiences and cultural upbringing can be understood as an ongoing process of identity formation. Subjects may or may not be aiming to assimilate to the mainstream reference group, and life achievements or experiences may not always be measured against this reference group: “Consequently, using a subject-centered approach, we may see new measures of what immigrants, not to mention natives, define as successful or unsuccessful in their own terms.”⁴⁷ Quantifying *less or more* levels of assimilation is intrinsically subjective, and dependent on the reference group in question-- in this case, I am considering the subject’s relationship to their first generation parents *and* a largely mainstream society of native born Whites as separate but equally relevant reference groups in understanding their own processes of assimilation. Although my interviewees were not the ones employing the term “assimilation,” the word is being used to describe their responses to varying questions on cultural identity, parental integration, and their own relationship to this country as a whole. Recent literature on second generation immigrants, or immigrants in general, have come to use more neutral and less politically charged terminology along the sides of “incorporation.”

Regardless of terminology, there are several intrinsic connections made by my participants that speak truths about the multifaceted nature of incorporation amongst the children of first generation Arab Muslim immigrants. To become an American remains an elusive task, one that is relative to the individual's perceptions, definitions, and cultural experiences. A

⁴⁷ Helen B. Morrow, “Assimilations in New Destinations,” n.d.

spectrum of identification and proximity can be formed, but at its core this spectrum will only ever be a means of measuring something none of my participants fully fulfill, according to their own accounts and wavering statements on identification. To be an incorporated American for a second generation Muslim is to occupy one of the many grey, liminal spaces afforded to this demographic, one that is rife with nuances and the implicit demand to give parts of oneself up to fit the “whole” of society. You are an American by virtue of birthright, the name on your birth certification and perhaps even college ID. But the tether to a massively different religion and language, ideals and binaries remains, from Layla to Mo, Fatima to even Ali and Khalid. It seems as though for my participants, and plenty of other second generation Americans, to assimilate or to incorporate, is not to become an American. Rather, it is to become an Arab, to put your ethnic foot forward, and affirm lands and ideals from which your parents left for the so-called streets of the free and stripes of the brave. But to become an Arab in this country, my participants must also grapple with the ever important question of race, and the looming presence of whiteness in relation to their skin, their ethnicity and even their religion.

Chapter 2: Between the Boxes of Black and White

“So I think White, especially in America, does not refer to your skin tone necessarily. White, in my mind, when I’m asked about if someone is White... I think specifically White Americans.. Who grew up in America, whose parents have been in America..” -Ali, 21

The word for “white” in *darija*, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic I’ve grown up speaking, is the same word for “egg.” Toddling through the thick aired halls of Casablanca’s dry airport on the beginnings of my family’s three month long annual summer trips, the sunshine would hit my not yet accustomed cheeks and shoulders, resulting in a sunburn and itchy reaction, time and time again. And of course, this contributed to the gaggle of aunts and cousins calling me an “egg” at the beach shores, when our clothing came flying off, and my brother and I remained the ones needing layers of thick, glooping sunscreen. The word would come tinged at the edges with the faintest envy, beginning the question: what does it mean to be white? What is whiteness? And why did the classification simply not feel right? Is it a phenotype, or rather, a social category of accorded privileges? Are Arabs white? Can Arabs be black? These are only a few of the thoughts that began to unfold over years of introspective reflection on summers spent overseas, spent in a place and on land I should be able to call home.

In an effort to untangle these conflicting thoughts, I asked each participant to describe their racial identification group and to define what whiteness means to them. Fatima and Ali offered variations of a similar answer. The common denominator for a definition of whiteness, or even conceptions of the White⁴⁸ racial category, was being an “American,” revealing the integral connection between race and ideations of assimilation or “becoming” a part of your new nation:

⁴⁸ White: the legal Racial category
white/whiteness: concept(s) of the White racial category

Fatima: The thing is, when I think White, I think like straight up American. You know what I mean. Like Southern, at least three generations of your family has been born here. That's what I think when I think actual White.

Ali: White, in my mind, when I'm asked about if someone is White... I think specifically White Americans.. Who grew up in America, whose parents have been in America...

Regardless of who the participant was, and where they were from, each presented a similar set of associations for the White racial category, the most consistent being generational, or familial lineage in America. Interestingly enough, Fatima associates the South (of the USA) with marks of an authentic “White” person, conveying the ways in which media representations of a White race have come to be stratified along regional lines as well. And inversely, when asked to define being an American, as in the previous chapter, more often than not, my interviewees consistently mentioned being “White.” There is a deeply intertwined thread between the category of White and American. “Straight up American,” “actual White,” “White Americans:” these are just some of the descriptors used by Fatima and Ali above.

Literature has suggested that for most people in this country, even outside of its bounds, immigrant or not, there remains an innate conflation between the concept of America as a country and being White, the same way one could argue there remains a dominant conflation between being Muslim and being Arab. There is consistently a “linking of American identity to a set of ascriptive characteristics privileging whiteness...” as sociologist Michael Jones- Correa described in a study on the shaping of an American identity, whilst measuring immigrant perceptions of the US born. Despite the fact that the White racial category on its own is not the same as the concept of whiteness, inclusion within this White racial or ethnic category largely forms the basis of one’s “whiteness,” and the social privileges that flow from the concept.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Michael Jones-Correa et al., “Immigrant Perceptions of U.S.-Born Receptivity and the Shaping of American Identity,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 47–80, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.03>.

For my participants, the ascriptive characteristic of being “straight up American” constitutes being White. You are either an “actual” white, or you are not. Mo succinctly articulates this in his distinction between an “Arab White” and a “White person,” implying that there is a relationship between the category of White and category of Arab, albeit a legal one, and that perhaps there is a grey space through which Arabs can inhabit the White category. Despite the fact that Arabs historically have managed to classify as white, and some segments of the MENA population actively affirm a White racial category, many, as my participants, do not identify with the category, and do not feel it is in line with their lived experiences-- experiences of subtle or overt microaggressions, stereotyping and othering.

During the Naturalization Era of this nation, several legal relationships were in place that paved the way for the current relationship of Arabness to whiteness and non-whiteness, as well as the White racial category. These legal relationships similarly established and still give form to the implicit connection made by my participants of America to the racial category of White: a) “Islam was treated as an ethno-racial identity,” meaning Islam and being a Muslim was conflated with being an Arab, no matter what, b) Christianity was aligned and associated with whiteness, particularly an American whiteness, and c) the proving or disproving of Whiteness for Arab immigrants in the early twnetith century was dependent on the extent to which immigrants could appeal their proximity to Christianity and their distance from Islam and therefore, Arabness:

Because Arab identity was presumptively Muslim, and Muslims were presumptively non-white, naturalization judges presumed that Arabs were non-whites. At the same time, because of the presumed nexus between Christianity and whiteness, Arabs who could demonstrate that they were Christians could sometimes overcome the presumption of non-whiteness that attached to their Arab identity.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Khaled A. Beydoun, “Between Muslim and White: The Legal Construction of Arab American Identity,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 22, 2014), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2529506>.

A significant portion of racial classification was predicated on religion. Christianity, in collaboration with other factors like language, economic status, and skin tone, became the foundation for the social privileges of whiteness accorded to those who were deemed White. And because these social privileges are typically not afforded to Arabs and MENA Americans today, despite the legal category, there appears dissonance experienced and defined by my participants above.

Several of my interlocutors were also aware of the disconnect in legal classifications of the MENA demographic, as opposed to social classifications that come from the community. Building on the aforementioned history, I was curious to know how my participants racially classified themselves, seeing as they clearly distanced themselves from the categories of either Americanness, whiteness, or White. In “filling out forms,” my interviewees were asked to directly confront who they were racially: White? Other? Black? Religion rears its head yet again, especially as it remains an expression of my participants’ ethnicities, therefore inevitably affecting their racial classifications. Therefore, when asked about how they racially classified, most participants answered “Middle Eastern.” Participants also said the following:

Mo: Right now when I do sign something for race... I say I'm Middle Eastern and Arab overall when someone asks me what are you, I have no idea what to say.

Ali: Um so I wanna say I have filled forms when I was younger where there was no other choice... I would just go with Caucasian because that's how we've been described but it's not accurate at all and not reflective of the reality of it.

Fatima: I'm not sure if any other North African has had issues with this especially growing up, but I put down White, just because that's what I've always been told... I don't consider myself actually White. like I'm Moroccan, but just for the sake of paperwork, I feel like that's what I have to put down because that's what I've been told from elementary and middle school.

Even for those who were not explicitly of the Middle East, there seemed a dependency on this label, conveying a panethnic identification; these same interviewees confessed to occasionally

checking off a box for White when left with no option. Nonetheless, the label “Middle East” carries the largest cultural capital, in the sense that it remains a title most clearly associated with a distinguishable Arab, and often Muslim, identity. Fatima and Mo make explicit a reliance on aligning with a panethnic term like “Middle Eastern,” “Arab,” or “North African;” these are the identification terms that they *truly* identify with, reflecting their ethnicities under the same labels. But these categories do not exist in the American legal framework. It is only “for the sake of paperwork,” or “what I’ve been told,” that pushes Fatima into the corner of marking down White. For Ali, the reasoning is similar; he too says “that’s what I’ve always been told,” and “that’s how we’ve been described,” further corroborating the importance of social context in identity formation among my participants.

Fatima: But I try to specify and put down North African. I feel like it's kind of tricky because we're not considered Arab, but growing up in Astoria you're so surrounded by Arabs.... Now I just say North African.

It is worth noting that later in her response, Fatima brought to attention a deeper layer within the broader debate on racial classification of North Africans and Middle Easterners. Whereas my other participants, who were from Egypt and Palestine, spoke to the category of Middle East, Fatima, and later Layla (“So I’m Algerian, I’m North African”), were explicit in stating that they were North African, further establishing that there is a distinction within the category of MENA, and especially within what has become and been the all encompassing category of Arab, between those from the Middle East and those from North Africa. Fatima goes as far as to assert that North Africans like herself are not considered Arab, and that within her home community of Astoria, the surrounding genuine “Arabs,” presumed to be not North African, seem to serve as a green pass into the Arab category.

As is also suggested by literature on MENA classification, Islam is a primary factor in racializing Arabs simultaneously as an “other:” “Muslims, when compared to Christians, are

less likely to see themselves as part of a mainstream "white" category of identity."⁵¹ MENA distance from Islam came to parallel their distance to citizenship and therefore whiteness and the White category. Thus, my practicing Muslim participants, save for one, who no longer practices the faith today, do not identify with the only racial category currently afforded to the group, White: "Muslims are more likely to claim an "Other" identity and resist a white racial classification, hinting that an Other identity may serve as a means of asserting one's own cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously distancing oneself from the mainstream."⁵² Though an often overlooked connection, religion intricately weaves itself into classifications of race, especially for my demographic in question and participants interviewed. In the case of Arab American Muslims, it seems as though religion has become the racial category that has never existed, thus "racing" Arabs through Islam.

Being White and Being Arab

When taking into consideration the history behind a White racial category, in relation to Arab immigrants and the now diverse Arab American diaspora, there was evidence that some of my participants addressed the potential for inclusion as White. But, this inclusion was predicated on specific terminology that served to combine these two warring identities-- Arab and White. In their responses to the question of racial identity, Mo and Layla also said the following:

Mo: There's an experience of an Arab White and the experience of a White person... I benefit in certain social aspects, not in the long run.

Layla: Well in terms of my racial identity, I do identify as a White Arab Muslim, a White Arab American.

It is certainly not a surprise that portions of the Arab American population willingly identify themselves as White, and several studies have shown this can be a result of several other

⁵¹ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

⁵² Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

variables of their identity, such as age, country of origin, and of course, religious affiliation. But, could a semi-acceptance of White racial identity prove a strategic move in chasing a fraction of the privileges that the concept of whiteness affords those of its group? Some scholars suggest that "... immigrants are not inherently "white" or "non-white," but they associate or disassociate themselves with "whiteness" in response to various situational factors."⁵³ This relation idea of identity, which will be discussed later in the chapter, comes to bear on Layla and Mo's articulations of Arab-ness: "an Arab White," "a White Arab Muslim, a White Arab American." Though Layla and Mo's stories of identity are ones closely linked to their native cultures, language, and practice of Islam, and despite the fact that they are of a generation predicted to more readily reject the category of White, there is, at the very least, a semblance of connection, a kind of pioneering, in asserting that their racial identity is both White *and* Arab. Layla goes as far as linking religion to her racial classification category, further affirming the significance that religious affiliation plays for ethnic and racial boundary marking. Mo more sternly delineates that there may be overlap, and even potential for benefit from the social constitution of prescribed privileges afforded to a "White person." But, it is a short lived fuse, one connected to a surface level, phenotypic passing, not at all encompassing the substance of realities led by participants like Mo.

The legal history of naturalization in this country is in part why Arabs are led to believe that they are part of the White racial category. In the establishing of a common sense context surrounding Arabs classifying as White, our society and legal systems have laid the foundation for invisibility and perpetual confusion. But in the end, it seems as though this confusion is the only collective certainty for a group who have yet to attain a legal categorical distinction. Like

⁵³ Kristine J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans," *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 860–79.

Mo, many, including myself, “have no idea what to say,” and beneath whichever box they tick or whichever phrase they may write down, it is clear that is in part of the social obligations placed on their respective ethnicities and national backgrounds. There remains an awareness of the racial dissonance through which they persevere, a sense that, as Fatima and Ali articulated, “it’s [White] not accurate at all,” “and not reflective of the reality.”

The Intersections of Being Black and Arab

The label “Arab” remains loaded with implications of colorism and racial hierarchies, ones that ask, especially with relation to the presence of Black Arab Muslims. Where do they fit on the scale of whiteness and race in the Arab world? Because of the predominant relationship of Islam to Arabs, and Arabs to a White racial category, literature often abandons the presence of blackness and Black individuals in the Arab diaspora. Scholar Khaled A. Beydoun, in his work on Islamophobia in America, presents us with a fact that is too often overlooked in the Arab Muslim community today: “Despite constant and conspiring efforts to erase their existence, black Muslims do exist, and they occupy the intersection where mounting anti-black racism and Islamophobia collide.”⁵⁴ And to analyze the nature of whiteness and a White racial category is implicitly to discuss the nature of blackness and a Black category, as they pertain to being an Arab and a Muslim. Speaking to Hannah, 18, of Schenectady, New York, I was able to dig deeper into the question of racial classification of the broad and stratified Middle Eastern and North African world. Her parents, immigrants from Sudan, arrived in Virginia almost twenty years ago, and after many years, and several lodging switches, have settled in upstate New York. As Hannah found herself moving in and out of elementary and middle school, into highschool, and now university at Vassar College, she equally found herself navigating the blurred internal

⁵⁴ Khaled A. Beydoun, “Between Anti-Black Racism and Islamophobia,” in *American Islamophobia*, 1st ed., Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear (University of California Press, 2018), 152–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxs79.10>.

layers of her identity After being asked to describe her racial identity and the meaning behind her racial identification group, she replied the following:

Hannah: Well, I am from Sudan, so I am Black. But, I feel like this is actually something, it's something that I think about a lot. I feel like since I am both Black and a Muslim, it's kind of like I have this weird... I don't know how to describe it. It's like I don't really belong in that group. And so whenever I say I'm Black, I always feel like I'm kind of lying in a way. Um, because, uh when people see me and they see my hijab, it's like I'm Muslim. And I feel like, I know it's not mutually exclusive, but it's like 'pick one.'

Hannah's relationship to her complex racial identity is intrinsically connected to religion and Islam. She feels as though her identification with the "Black" category does not sufficiently address another facet of her identity: being a Muslim, paralleling the disconnect my other Muslim participants, though not Black, feel with the identification of White. She expresses her frustration with the sets of binaries imposed and reinforced by our society: "pick one," "I don't really belong in that group," "I'm kind of lying in a way." As she will later go on to describe, Hannah feels an imposter in whichever category she chooses to align with. It is of note that that two categories she mentions when considering her racial identity are Black and Muslim, implying the racing of Arabs and alignment of Arabs, even implicitly, with Islam, and a non-Muslim association with the categories of Black and White. Though not mutually exclusive, as she herself comments, said categories of Black and Muslim, and even White and Arab, become mutually exclusive anyway. Her response to this question, in tone, in incomplete sentences and vagaries ("It's kind of like I have this weird," "I don't know how to describe it") emphasize her sense of confusion on the topic, as she attempts to weigh the varying conflicting pressures that inform which racial category is in accordance with her Sudanese Muslim identity. Hannah exists in a liminal space where racial categories come to be defined by influences of the external world around her, influences that have implications for her decision as to whether she is Black or Sudanese. Hannah's sense of self is a reminder of several important qualities within the

study of identity, which I use in my study of my participants' identities: "Identity, or the sense of self, is social and relational: our sense of who we are depends on and is the consequence of belonging to a society and participating in its culture."⁵⁵

So, Hannah's self recognized identities include being Black, Sudanese, and Muslim. Even in her claims to these categories, she remains unsure where to step and what to call her own, essentially influenced by the relational and interactional aspects of identity formation. External boundaries on blackness and the Black racial category, as well as Muslim-ness and being Arab, lead her to further question what she *should* identify with, as opposed to what she *does* identify with.

When asked to define what blackness and whiteness means to her, especially within the context of her racial liminality, Hannah shed light on a critical relationship between the two concepts, and how this binary manifested within her Sudanese upbringing:

Hannah: So I guess... I guess for me blackness has always been 'You should try to look more like you're White,' if you wanna be considered attractive, and that's just for a long time how I saw my own race... and its changing now a lot, but it has impacted my view on a lot of things too and [on] how I see myself.

Hannah expresses another instance where a category of identification is defined by a society's dominant culture. The standards of blackness come to be defined through a proximity to or distance from phenotypic markers of whiteness deemed "attractive." Blackness has, for Hannah, represented a journey towards whiteness, and thus highlighting a fascinatingly heartbreaking relationship between whiteness being Black. Her racial understanding of being a Black woman, and notions of blackness, in relation to her Sudanese upbringing, have been constructed through certain characteristics of whiteness, resulting in a paradox that furthers her imposter syndrome, which is a phenomenon that was originally identified in 1978 by two psychologists researching

⁵⁵ Ernest N. McCarus, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

the particular ways in which the “feeling that your success is due to luck, and not because of your intelligence or skill” was more manifest in women than men. Since then, the syndrome can more loosely be defined as a sense of not belonging, or being a fraud.⁵⁶ Hence, to be Black, for Hannah, came to be understood as being White. Whiteness is not limited to physical characteristics, like skin tone and eye color. Albeit, *literally* embodying facets of being White, in this case, proves the gateway to being Black.

The latter part of her responses reiterates a connection from earlier literature: race and religion are inextricably intertwined, and the crux of Hannah’s conflict with racial identification is at once related to the category of White and Islam.

Hannah: ... And so it's something I do think about a lot, even though I do know I am Black... I get mistaken a lot for being a part of another ethnicity or race, so uh, I never really learned how to see myself as actually being African American and Muslim at the same time.

Despite her ultimately identifying as Black, she is unable to reconcile, and has “never really learned how” to see herself as a Black, or African American, and Muslim. This can be in part explained by the position that blackness, African Americans, and/or Black Arabs occupy within the Muslim Arab community. More often than not, the community of Black Muslims is treated as a separate entity by non-Black Muslims, conditionally referenced as existing, though not fully integrated into the larger body of Arab Muslims. Part of the reason for this can be traced back to demonstrations of whiteness for social and legal acceptance into the White category by groups of Arab immigrants in the early 20th century. And, as scholar Beydoun posits, one of the most notable traits of whiteness is anti-blackness and racism:

Indeed, blackness has been selectively co-opted by Muslim Americans when it suits situational existential or political interests, but the broader struggles, concerns, and bodies of black Muslim Americans are routinely sidelined, excluded, and, for non-black Muslim

⁵⁶ “Yes, Impostor Syndrome Is Real. Here’s How to Deal With It,” Time, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://time.com/5312483/how-to-deal-with-impostor-syndrome/>.

Americans striving for whiteness or coveting the “moderate Muslim” label, wholly rejected as being an impediment toward these ends.⁵⁷ Her response displays the disparate relationship that Islam has to racial categories, becoming a blockade against identification with either end of the Black-White racial binary.

Based on her evolving Black identification, I was curious to know more about her views on “Arabness.” Did she consider her blackness to coexist with being Arab? Did her Sudanese background lend itself to being labelled Arab and Black?

Interviewer: Which values are more important to your parents: those of racial identity, or “Arabness,” or those of religion and Islam?

Hannah: They’re really proud to be Sudanese, and... For example, my dad always tells us to speak in Arabic not in English, and my mom always wants me to talk to Sudanese people specifically... it’s like everything to them. Even though they have been here, in America, almost 19 years now, or 20 years, about that time, they still go ‘Don’t do this, this is what the Americans do. We’re Sudanese, so we do this.’

For Hannah’s parents, it is clear that being Sudanese eclipses the importance of religion. First and foremost they are ethnically Sudanese, privileging their language, and upholding a strong sense of ethnic identification through boundary creation: “Don’t do this, this is what the Americans do. We’re Sudanese, so we do this.”

Hannah: For me... it’s a little bit harder for me to feel like that. There are some aspects... I’m proud to be Sudanese, but I feel like it took me a long time to be proud of it. I’m in this weird middle space between being American and also being Sudanese. At the same time, there’s also another weird space between being American and also being Muslim.

Whereas Hannah still struggles to find her place among racial classifications, due primarily to her attempt to navigate the “weird space between being American and also being Muslim,” her parents, as native Sudanese individuals, have no issue affirming their ethnicity and therefore their Arabness, a supposed to an explicit category of race. Race does not pose as salient a conflict for the immigrant parents of second generation children, for wherever they came from, they were

⁵⁷ Khaled A. Beydoun, “Between Anti-Black Racism and Islamophobia,” in *American Islamophobia*, 1st ed., Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear (University of California Press, 2018), 152–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxs79.10>.

simply themselves. It is only upon existing in America that they begin to assert their ethnicities, and their ethnicities become the closest category to race. As for the children of these immigrants, grey spaces are constantly looming. Hannah consistently occupies an undefined racial middle ground, knowing she is Black and American, knowing she is Arab, and knowing she is Muslim, yet proving unable to cohesively combine these identities under any single category.

Between. Liminal. Grey. Not quite. If there is one thing to be understood from my interviews on the concept of race, it is that nothing is really understood. The only certainty is a collective uncertainty with regards to any federally imposed racial category. Whether White or Black, Middle Eastern or North African, the only other remaining, visible yet grossly invisible, uniting factor for my participants is religion. Islam remains a potential compass for decoding why exactly racial classification proves so elusive a task for my participants, and many others like them. In the same ways that it has inspired my interviewee's notions of assimilation and/or incorporation, it remains the factor belying much of the confusion. Hannah most clearly articulated the connection between race and religion, and the ways that a definitive stance on one's ethnicity can give way to far less definitive understandings of one's race, as can also be said for all my other participants. And so the spool continues to unravel: could the most important factor in second generation identity formation be the practice of religion? Has Islam been the missing puzzle piece to considerations of race and incorporation, and more intricate notions of self identification?

Chapter 3: The Intersections of “Gendered” Culture and “Good” Religion

“Oh, you can’t act like this in front of a man. That’s what our religion says... ” -Fatima, 20

What does it mean for my interviewees to be “good Muslims?” And how has Islam come to shape my participant’s identities in gendered ways? The social spaces that served as sites of connections are themselves indicative of the initial traces of gendered practices and gender role expectations, however subtle and young these traces are in nature. For example, two of the first female participants I interviewed, Layla, and Fatima, 21 and 20, respectively, are girls I knew from years past. The connections are aplenty: whether from the popular public elementary school at the heart of Astoria and bordering Steinway Street’s throngs of MENA, where our mothers likely gathered for daily afternoon chitchat in the courtyard as children seeped through heavy, forest green metal doors at 2 PM, or from dully carpeted (and often dreaded) weekend Arabic grammar and Quran classes at the Muslim American Society’s (MAS) Dar Al- Dawah mosque. Dar Al- Dawah translates to “House of Invitation,” the word “dawah” meaning a call, an invitation to embracing the practice and religion of Islam. Under the rumbling bridges of Astoria Boulevard, and a block down from a Catholic-Greek Church, North African and Middle Eastern immigrants of all walks and social classes trickled towards the 10-step stairway and enrolled their children, paying the additional fees and driving them to and fro on Saturday mornings and afternoons, all in an attempt to tie and double knot the tether of Muslim faith to their offsprings’ frontal lobe.

And because of this, our social networks overlap, as do our parents’ social network, and our current lifestyles: studious daughters, embarking on or almost completing a four year college education, keeping in line with expectations placed upon us, and expectations we’ve placed upon

ourselves. In realizing the common spaces we occupy, primarily educational institutions and the homes we grew up in, one can begin to parse out the influence of religion in ethnic upbringing. Through the conflation of a specific practice of Islam as a “culturally right” thing to do as an Arab, we can better understand the ways religion shape the identity formation of my participants in particularly *gendered* ways. This conflation, and what can be called a certain abuse of the power of religion, was articulated by most participants, regardless of their gender. All were able to recognize the importance of religion, and the importance of being a “good Muslim,” as separate and superior to what it means to be “Arab.” Moreover, parental aligning of Islam as a moral code to an ethnicity and culture came to inspire parenting practices; being an authentic Moroccan, Egyptian, etc. hinged upon following mechanized stipulations of Islam into new rules. This, in turn, manifested in practices specific to females and males.

To Be A Good Muslimah

Of the most fascinating takeaways of my interviews was the implicit difference in gendered practices and expectations for my female participants. From the beginnings of interviews, it became clear that ideas of respect, modesty and responsibility were more punitively applied to females, meaning, female participants’ identities were shaped more heavily by what they could not do and participate in, like immodest clothing, dating, and other “disrespectful” acts. Despite the fact that all participants described obeying and respecting one’s elders as an important component of their cultural upbringing, it is important to note that female participants repeatedly mentioned the ways in which they were trained to be mindful of male family members and the worth they had in bringing respect, or potentially disrespect and shame, to their family. Fatima described to me the way that it was evident her parents often combined

culture with religion to buttress the establishment of practices they deemed the most

“Moroccan.”

Interviewer: What values are most important to your family? Meaning, which values are more important to your parents: those of racial identity, or “Arabness,” or those of religion and Islam?

Fatima: ... I do think that a lot of parents mix culture and religion and think the two are one in the same when they're really not. A lot of the ideals we have in Islam are not Moroccan ideals. The most, like, common example I would have of that are certain misogynistic things that are going on. They try to mix things: 'Oh, you can't act like this in front of a man. That's what our religion says,' when in reality, it's just... Moroccans think that's disrespectful, Even though religion dictates none of that.... Women are expected to like, not be outspoken, like at all.

The all too often conflation of religion and Moroccan culture, to Fatima, is what breeds the rigid standards for what she calls “certain misogynistic things.” Moroccan ideals are created through the use of religion, these ideals being founded in ideas of respect and shame that are supposedly found in Islam. Fatima was clear in articulating that there are salient differences between Islamic ideals and Moroccan ideals, stating that Moroccan ideals are not to be found in Islam-- they are a result of a constructed culture of Arabs, or more broadly, North Africans and Middle Easterners, which employs religion to the end of advancing its goals, thus rendering a culture of Arabness or a culture of North Africans a separate entity from Islam. For Fatima and her family, the use of Islam to propagate Moroccan cultural ideals come to create expectations for women in particular, ones that bleed into the formation of a normatively female identity, this identity then manifesting in specific behaviours and according actions. Women, in relation to men, must heed certain rules, and “can’t act like this in front of a man,” for fear of disrespecting both themselves *and* the man in question.

Fatima went on to describe several of these rules:

Fatima: It was also, especially growing up a girl, I feel like it shaped... definitely affected certain things, especially in terms of men. “Oh don’t dress like this.” Even before I started wearing hijab, it was like “Oh don’t dress like this out of respect for your Dad... know how to conduct yourself in public because it’s a reflection of your family...”

Fatima, like other Arab women, constantly carries a certain pressure that dictates them to be the utmost model of good faith, good standing, and respect. Fatima was able to trace patterns that emerged, “especially growing up a girl.” Through childhood, and the different phases of identity formation and development, there was consistently an antagonistic relationship to *anything* “in terms of men.” Here, the father figure takes on the role of ultimate leader, one whose role in the family is expected to be treated accordingly by his female offspring. And in the same period of unfolding, tender time, it was carved out for Fatima that she was “a reflection of [her] family.” Once again, the dynamics of the private and public spheres of Arab American Muslim families come to light. It seems as though Arab American Muslim girls and women become emblematic of both the private and public sphere, conducting the responsibilities of publicly facing duties, literally dressing the part, in order to reflect the “goodness” and “respect” of their private families.

Layla similarly described this conflation of religion and culture in her Algerian family. When asked the same question, she described the ways in which an Algerian culture took the forefront of authority in her household under the guise of religion. She disagreed with this stance, believing religion to be more important, and detailing an example of the “abuse” of religion in parental discipline:

Layla: Um, I just feel like culturally things are looked down upon, or like ‘You’re bringing shame to the family if you do x y z,’ when technically, religiously, it’s permissible.

The terminology with which Layla and Fatima are discussing religion’s imprint on their ethnic culture (“permissible,” “dictates,” “conduct”) reveals the strictness of enforcement. Religion is a belief system, but also a set of rules. As for religion as culture, whether Moroccan or Algerian, the belief system is boiled down to a collection of transactions, a formula for behavior: “You’re

bringing shame to the family if you do x, y, z.” Religion becomes the answer to what is culturally inappropriate. The variables in the broader equation for proper religious practice as a female come to be filled in by the behaviour of said females. Layla elaborated on her comment above, describing the ways cultural ideals of respect and permissibility translated to specific actions and patterns, all under the guise of religion:

Layla: So, of course there is a level of respect that we have to keep. We can't curse as much as we want. We pretty much, honestly, we don't even watch American shows as a family anymore because there's a lot of inappropriate scenes that are added... and they just get really inappropriate in front of our Dad especially. Also, for example, dating. My Dad usually has no idea when I have a boyfriend or when I'm going out. I would tell my mom on the low... we have to keep a level of respect, especially next to the Dad, I feel like.

Amongst the rules of general respect expected for a woman to carry on her own, like dressing and acting accordingly, Layla reveals a sliver of the ways family dynamics of respect in Arab American Muslim households unfold. For Layla, it is a given, “of course,” that a level of respect in the house is maintained. This level of respect is implicitly directed towards a father figure, as she repeatedly mentions: “they just get really inappropriate in front of our Dad especially,” and “we have to keep a level of respect, especially next to the Dad.” The importance of a leading father figure in Arab culture and Arab households further highlights the ways in which religion has been used to support a specific notion of ethnicity and proper behavior, therefore becoming a culture of its own. In a study and research conducted by professors and scholars Jana A. Scheible and Fenella Fleischmann on gender differences in religious practices among second generation Moroccan and other Muslims in Paris, they commented on the following: “Indeed, several studies show that Muslim immigrants on average subscribe to a more conservative gender ideology than the majority population in Western European countries.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Jana A. Scheible and Fenella Fleischmann, “Gendering Islamic Religiosity in The Second Generation: Gender Differences in Religious Practices and the Association with Gender Ideology among Moroccan- and Turkish-Belgian Muslims,” *Gender and Society* 27, no. 3 (2013): 372–95.

Layla's experience with religion as culture in her household supports research that suggests swaths of Muslim immigrants subscribe to more traditional gender dynamics and roles. Her Algerian culture, functioning through Islam, has created several sets of rules, and ultimately, a layer of secrecy and another facet of her general duality as an Arab and an American. She doesn't watch what she terms "American shows," her dating life is kept under wraps ("My Dad usually has no idea when I have a boyfriend..."), and the more typical lack of cursing. The concept of sex and sexual relations, for an Arab Muslim female, is one of many taboos; this part of her is ever hidden from her father, for the sake of respect and appropriateness. The taboo of dating and marriage is at once silenced and ever present in an Arab Muslim daughter's role in the household, an unspoken agreement. Fatima described an instance of this observed through one of her close, second generation Egyptian-American Muslim friends:

Fatima: I know with some of my friends, some of my Egyptian friends, for example, the treatment between [boys and girls] is completely different... Like sex, for example. Boys... I'm sure a lot of these parents know what their sons are doing, they're out cyphing, they're drinking, they're out having sex or whatever. A girl that I know, for example... her older brother found out she wasn't a virgin, and he flipped out... She would bring up the fact that he wasn't also... there's very much a double standard there...

In the instance of an Arab Muslim female potentially partaking in similar act as her older brother, there is unfounded questioning, anger and resentment, she went on to describe. Arab Muslim male family members, with specific consideration to the brother-sister dynamic in a household, arguably occupy positions of less scrutiny and lowered expectations. Brothers are able to exist in a hidden transparency, meaning, just as Arab Muslim women's sexual or romantic lives are never to be mentioned, and assumed to be non-existent until a qualifiable marriage, perhaps, Arab Muslim male's sexual and social lives are assumed to be active and brimming with what would be considered "bad:" "cyphing, they're drinking, they're out having sex." But, as Fatima describes, there is a silent parental acknowledgement of this, with the

standards of secrecy much higher for a woman than a man. In the ways that a boy in an Arab Muslim household is able to fly under the radar of regulation and behaviour, an girl cannot. She is intrinsically more bound to standards of respect, purity, and primness.

Households and Patriarchal Practices

Hannah, my 18 year old Sudanese participant, built off of much of the examples Layla and Fatima have brought to light. It is worth noting how revealing the mere amount of times “my father,” or “my dad” have been brought up by my female participants, in ways that have not been spoken about by my male participants. Hannah described to me several ways in which the importance of respect, with Islam as the household’s evidence, comes forth in other regulations:

Hannah: We did grow up a little bit sheltered... I never went to sleep overs until, like, sixth grade... One interesting thing was the shows we watched... my parents wouldn't let us watch anything that wasn't animated.... My father said it showed things that were wrong, like dating. We grew up watching mainly cartoons and stuff... our entertainment was very limited.

I feel like it played... it did make me feel a bit disconnected from my other friends as well... we didn't listen to music either, because that was considered wrong too, like American music... I feel like I had to do a lot of catching up... I'd rather be seen as a Muslim first and a Sudanese second.

Media consumption in Hannah’s household falls onto a moral scale, either good or bad. Hannah specifically notes that “[her] father” was the member who banged down the gavel on rightness and wrongness, as she transitions from initially mentioning that *both* parents, “my parents,” prohibited her from “watching anything that wasn’t animated,” to her father being the prescriber of “wrong.” The wrong was to be found in things “like dating,” supporting the overwhelming sense of taboo and privacy that exists in most Arab American Muslim households surrounding this topic. Amongst limited television screening lies limited music listening, particularly to what her family deemed “American music,” which was “considered wrong too.” The practices of media limitations are not solely experienced by one gender or the other. But, it is worth noting that the participants who have discussed it at most length have been my female participants. This

exhibits another way in which religion in the home is particularly burdened by women, seeing as these participants were acutely aware of these limitations in a way my male participants did not feel significant enough to mention, so further characterizing another gendered practice: identity formation and definition through the can'ts and nots.

Once again, we are able to understand much of what a female Arab Muslim's identity is predicated on, at least within the bounds of her private home and family: what she cannot do. Essentially, the female participants in my study, like Fatima and Layla, came to be emblematic of what *not* to do; they are manifestations of a specific Arab culture's ability to shape a gender through rules and limitations. An Arab woman's identity, presumably a Muslim Arab woman, embodies expectations and adherences to a rule book of rights and wrongs, respects and disrespects. Should disrespect occur, the onus is placed on the Arab woman, and her actions must rightly reflect her respectability.

Islam and The Boys

Gendered behavior was, of course, also prevalent amongst my male participants. As much as Arab Muslim women carry the majority of expectations and responsibilities as a result of a culture of religion, or simply the enacting of religion itself, a similar, yet different, gendering occurs among males. When Ali was asked to describe cultural ideals, and the ways he believed Islam to have influenced gender roles in his family, as well as parental expectations of him and his brother, he expressed the following:

Ali: I recognize that I'm very culturally Muslim. It's something that has taken me so long to kinda see the flaws of and over time fix. You have a lot of biases and underlying beliefs that are pretty messed up if you're born into Islam. And a lot of it came with me, a lot of it stayed with me for years and I think to this day, I have to undo my biases... a very male centered culture, very male centered mentality in the Middle East; which doesn't really help you growing up when it is cemented within you that women are less and men are the ones that should be in the front...

Ali, who went on to describe that he has since distanced himself from what he termed his father's "extremist" Muslim religious practices and expectations, captures precisely the roots of a skewed culture of Islam, one that is woven into the households of my participants in varying ways, and thus provides the basis for instilling patterns of gendered behavior. It was most striking to hear Ali assert his ever present tie to Islam, on a cultural as opposed to religious level, despite his abandonment of the fragments of this culture he finds to be most "messed up," or toxic: "a very male centered culture," "women are less and men are the ones that should be in the front," "very male centered mentality." His comments on a "male centered mentality in the Middle East" guide us towards an understanding of what may constitute Arab culture, which is more or less the same irregardless of what type of Arab ethnicity one is. Interestingly enough, women's bodies, in Ali's interpretation of and experience with a culture of Islam, are literally made to loom in the back; not only are they deemed innately unequal, in some regards, but they are to stay *behind* the bodies of men. For Ali, the frustration runs deep, especially as he expresses the ways that the echoes of these cultural pillars still haunt him today. As a continuation of the previous response on being "culturally Muslim," Ali further described to me the actions and behaviours he cycled through as a child that were a result of this culturally Muslim's "male obsessed society:"

Ali: I was completely, as a child, groomed into being a certain kind of a man... I'm very stuck in this gender bubble of what I was supposed to be that my parents put me in... Whenever my sister would go anywhere, whenever my mother would go anywhere, it was ingrained within me... to take care of them, to protect them, in the physical sense... that I was the man of the family. When my dad was not around... it put a pressure on me to be a certain kind of man.. to have some wise fatherly figure qualities. I was really pushed into it. I think in my head, there was no choice for me to be a man than to be a man this way..."

There was a mold to which Ali had to fit, a mold being pressed onto him from early on under the hands of a "cultural Islam." He was "groomed into being," and "it was ingrained" within him to be "the man of the family," as a result of his Egyptian culture's interpretation and

eventual execution of Islam. For men, as for women, it is an enforcement of an Islam bogged down by an ethnic culture's influence and weight that creates a culture of Islam. Ali expressed that part of ethnic Arab culture has to do with being so "male obsessed;" this is not a reflection of his sentiments on Islam. Implicit in the language used by Ali is the process of change, the act of instilling within someone seeds of someone new, in a sense. Once again, we circle back to the immense importance of patriarchy in some of the households, ethnicities, and cultures of Islam discussed above. There is a tension within the relationship of my second generation participants and their first generations fathers or dads especially, seeing as they are the single family member repeatedly brought up when discussing their behaviors. Ali was staged, literally "pushed into it," as he says, his strings pulled just the right directions to render him a step in for his dad, to embody the qualities of a "certain kind of man," which very much focused on the physicality of the body in providing protection and hence becoming the utmost marker of masculinity: "... to take care of them, to protect them, in the physical sense." He acknowledges the remnants of these influences on his behaviors, and even on his biases, as a "gender bubble," a remaining mental, perhaps even physical, constraint.

My findings thus far are not to say that Islam encourages gender inequality. Yet, patriarchal values have longed controlled many Arab Muslim states and countries, of which my participants are all connected to. In a study on gender equality and democracy, scholars Helen Rizzo, Abdel-Hamid Abdel-Latif and Katherine Meyer compared Arab Muslim and non-Arab Muslim societies. They discussed the ways in which zones of North Africa, stretching into the Middle East, can be classified as a band of countries containing higher levels of "classic patriarchy:"

This zone is characterized by the low status of women in general as a result of patrilineal-patrilocal households, high fertility rates and low age at first marriage, high

maternal and infant mortality rates, higher rates of female illiteracy and lower levels of female educational enrollment, low female labor force participation, and the lack of women's political participation and political right.⁵⁹

This can in part be explained by the use of religion in several Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa to support a higher status of men in power, and therefore transfer this ideal unto their populations. The gender sentiments and experiences that my participants have described so far implicitly or explicitly make reference to patriarchal patterns, and the importance of a head of household father or alpha male type. Fatima most clearly described this importance:

Fatima: ... There's always this thing of like, ya know, respecting the males in the household. For example, not wearing certain things around them, even though that's fully your family member... my Mom would be like 'No actually go put on a sweater or something, don't wear that around your Dad... you have to show respect to him.'

An ethos of respect rears its head yet again, with particular regards to the respect paid to the patriarch(s) of a household, even if, as Fatima details, they are your direct family, like fathers, and brothers. Respect, as has been noted, is one of the most important values my participants expressed was espoused in their households:

Hannah: Respect is something that is really valued between my family... Like no matter what happens we should always treat our parents with respect, because that's what the Quran says... Of course I respect my parents... but there are times when... because they aren't always perfect... so there are times when I wish I could say something, but I was told it wasn't respectful to say these kinds of things.... So like in a way it made me more quiet, and less vocal about, like, whether I have issues with something.

Hannah expresses the way in which the Quran, and therefore Islam as a religion, espouses ideals of respect. Yet, the Islamic or religious sense of respect takes on a separate form when combined with ethnic culture of an Arab family household, its reinterpretation becoming expressly directed to the behaviours of my female participants, in some cases leading to gradual silencing and erasure, as Hannah noted in her response to what values are most important to her family. Hence, we can better comprehend the seeds of gender identity formation amongst my female

⁵⁹ Helen Rizzo, Abdel-Hamid Abdel-Latif, and Katherine Meyer, "The Relationship Between Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparison of Arab Versus Non-Arab Muslim Societies," *Sociology* 41, no. 6 (2007): 1151–70.

participants. There is an internalization of implicit, and sometimes explicit patriarchy, that is founded on Islam-backed notions of respect, which then inform practices of the female body, such as choice of dress, or speech. And unfortunately, surveys and previous research do show the remaining lower levels of life quality for women in some of these countries, further intensifying the dissonance that second generation Arab American men and women occupy today, the former attempting to lean away from conventional definitions of masculinity and rhetorics of oppressive patriarchy their native cultures may impart upon them, while the latter navigate forging an independent identity unhindered by media stereotypes of the “oppressed” woman and unhindered by the remaining familial expectations of modesty and respectability.

Islam: Not The Problem

The conflation of Islam and Arab culture to create a deeply rooted culture of Islam for North Africans and Middle Easterners continues to manifest through other rules and boundaries. This culture of behaviour was articulated by my participants through what they cannot do, placing religion on par with acts of negation. Others, like Hannah, articulated similar prohibiting practices, especially when it came to media, like music and television, or clothing. Despite the fact that my participants have been born and raised here, and adhere their identities to a binary of Arab versus American, they remain strongly pulled into their home cultures, cultures that have been increasingly revealed to be reliant on a platform of religion to enforce limitations, standards, and most importantly, shape behaviours in gendered ways. As is noted of Hannah above, “I’d rather be seen as a Muslim first and a Sudanese second.” And as Fatima told me in one of her responses, “As a religion, Islam preaches equality between the genders. But, Arab culture dictates otherwise.” To discover the genesis of Arab culture and Arabness is to get at the crux of my discussion’s aim. For it is this culture that enables the usage of Islam for its own

means, whether in households or in statehoods. Though outside the scope of this study, this question of what forms Arab culture, beyond the factor of religion, is one worth considering.

All but one, my participants remain believers and practitioners of Islam today, in whatever capacity is most meaningful to themselves and their families; many have expressed a renewed interest in the religion, one independent of their parents', simply because they would like to be better informed of the history, and of the ethics behind Islam. Why? Because, in spite of the way in which Islam translates to Arab American households, the religion is not the problem. What lies beneath these responses by my participants is a *culture* of religion, one that melts together ethnicity and religion, creating the rulebooks for certain behaviours, by gender and by individual. Islam and Arabness become almost inextricable from the other, a conflation that runs so deep, even within many Arab American Muslim households, that one can scarcely pick it apart. Albeit, my participants were able to time and time again separate themselves from the culture of religion that seems to have engulfed their households, proclaiming that religion *should* be separated from culture, in order for any real equality or justice to reign free.

Conclusion: Remaining Confusions

“I’m in America. I don’t know myself. I don’t know what to do.” -Ramy, *Ramy* (Hulu)

Ramy is a critically acclaimed Hulu series which follows the life of Ramy Hassan, an Arab American Muslim millennial who is attempting to piece together his faith, and reconcile his Egyptian Muslim upbringing with life in New Jersey and New York City, in a post-9/11 society. The show remains one of the only realistic portrayals of Arab Muslim Americans today, and has received praise in no small part to the writing of its dimensional characters, and the representation of Muslim Arab Americans as “normal” people, struggling through the same issues any other millennial, and/or second generation immigrant, would. Besides tracing the story of the protagonist, Ramy, the show also follows his older sister Dina, an Anthropology graduate student, and zeros in on experiences of the immigrant incorporation process, gender roles and marriage. Ramy Hassan is portrayed by writer and actor Ramy Youssef, who himself shares several facts with the show’s main character, including his name, and being an Egyptian American Muslim who is attempting “to actualize his full spiritual potential through Islam.”⁶⁰ Youssef’s show is revolutionary precisely in its refreshingly raw representation of the second generation identity trials and tribulations often kept behind closed doors: doubting and questioning one’s beliefs, romantic and sexual escapades, substance use, questioning and/or embracing your family’s beliefs, and never feeling like you fit into any outline America has to offer.

⁶⁰ Aymann Ismail, “Ramy Season 2 Is Going to Shock American Muslims. Maybe We Need It.,” *Slate Magazine*, May 29, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/05/ramy-season-2-explained-muslim-criticism.html>.

Recognition and Representation

On April 1, 2021, The US State Department officially announced that the month of April had been designated Arab American Heritage Month. Spokesman Ned Price stated that “the group's contributions to the US ‘are as old as America itself.’⁶¹ About 27 states observe the month as such, though the designation has yet to be recognized nationally or by the U.S. Federal Government. As of 2016, there are an estimated 3.7 million Arabs in America, coming from a range of ethnic, political and religious backgrounds, a majority of whom are Muslim. And though the state’s department announcement is certainly a step towards a type of recognition, that is, government recognition that there *is* a such a thing as a distinct population of Arabs, it is emblematic of the larger issue at hand as it applies to this demographic: most of the American public has yet to understand the presence of Arab Americans past a grossly politicized and negligently racialized conception of the foreigner, the backwards, the domestic threat. These are the types of media representation that have dominated the screen and the print for at least the last two decades, only peaking after 9/11, and rampaging endlessly to this day. What *Ramy* represents is a coin toss in the bucket of progress, a glimmer in the otherwise bleak state of Arab American Muslim representation. The television show asserts what statistics and an unrecognized month designation are unable to on their own: shift the perception, however minute, of MENA Muslims towards the more humane. Nonetheless, these small markers of change, whether it be a new show, or the State Department’s recent announcement, remain overshadowed by the legal and social invisibility of this group, as Mo hinted at in one of his responses during our interview:

Mo: My own identity is supposed to be part of America, but it’s also ostracized and dehumanized in America. That’s the hardest part, is like, even me trying to navigate my experience as an American. Yes, I fit into that box, but I also don’t, because my identity and my background stop

⁶¹ Mirna Alsharif CNN, “April Is Arab American Heritage Month, the State Department Declares,” CNN, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/05/us/arab-american-heritage-month/index.html>.

me from being a full American, especially in a society like America, that's supposed to promote and be a place of equality.

He succinctly addressed the remaining paradox that is one of the inconclusive conclusions of my research. America espouses a liberal multiculturalism, but the reality is that this multiculturalism is within bounds, its limits forcibly keeping from entry many demographics and ethnic groups, including Arab Muslims. And, like Mo refers to it, America becomes a “box,” one that he may occupy on an occasional basis, but one that ultimately closes its doors to his entry. For how can my participants, and other second generation children, or Arab Muslim Americans, like myself, understand ourselves as being represented under the umbrella of America when we are scarcely, if at all, represented or perceived as humans, just like everyone else, ambling along the walks of our lives and challenges that come our way?

Hannah touchingly, though inadvertently, expressed her struggle with this question when recounting a not all too old memory of a morning in her household:

Hannah: I don't really feel like I fit into American society.... [In reference to the Insurrectionist events of Jan 6] I remember watching the news with my brother... with my youngest brother who is 11 and my parents and we were just sitting there in the morning... I think almost verbatim one of the men said if these people were Black, they would have been shot in the head; if they were Muslim, they would have been sniped... And I remember sitting there, and I didn't even know how to react, because it was true.... Actually hearing it being said on the news, with my youngest brother and my family there.... I had to leave after that... it was really hard for me... I remember thinking why do they hate us so much... so this plays a huge role in my feeling unAmerican...

Hannah's occupation of several identities that she has expressed a struggle with, namely being Black, Muslim and American, culminates in an ultimate feeling of a certain social alienation, meaning, she simply does not feel an American, and as has been mentioned in the previous chapters, she struggles to unite her Sudanese, Black and Muslim identity under one roof, resulting in an increased sense of estrangement from the society around her, the society that she should be incorporating into. This is the overwhelming similarity borne of my interviews and

discussions, a resounding confusion at repeated attempts to incorporate into and acknowledge a society that presents minimal room for the possibility of a symbiotic coexistence of divergent American and Arab Muslim identities. The gravity of this conclusion is expressed in Hannah's reacting of the crass, albeit unfortunately true, statement made by a news anchor: "They [Blacks] would have been shot in the head... they [Muslims] would have been sniped." This sense of violence directed at both of Hannah's identities is harrowing, but more importantly, heartbreaking, especially with regards to her concluding sentiment: "Why do they hate us so much?"

When considering the social, legal and political future of Arab American Muslims today, it is inconclusive whether there will be steps made to distill these stereotypes and connotations of violence and aggression, oppression and maltreatment, from Arabs more broadly, and from Islam more specifically. For perception hinges on representation, and representation is lackluster thus far, only furthering the reduction of an otherwise diverse demographic. This is evidenced by my aforementioned points of significance, a lack of an officially recognized Arab American Heritage Month, and *Ramy*, for they, in their own rights, represent the causes and effects of representation. Both emerged out of a demonstrated need for better representation, as an effect, and have thus become a cause of a slowly changing perception of Arab American Muslims, in their creation of a hope for understanding an ethnic and religious group. But, the only certain thing to have grown out of ill intentioned representation and perception is a group's resilience, an individual and collective will to rise above the conclusions being made. My participants are proof of the energy and effort made to transcend the judgements made upon your character, and staying true to your origins.

Concluding Remarks

Far too many moments of my young adult life have been spent pondering the question Hannah posed above: Why do they hate us so much? Why, in a borough of such immense diversity, do the women in headscarves or the men with beards still get the sideway glare and sidestep shuffle? And why do my mother and father, after almost three decades in the country, still feel the need to assert their belonging, whipping out their English like a secret weapon in public spaces, as if to say “I’m here too.” It is in large part questions like these, and moments like these, a sort of unconscious internalization of my parents’ status as perpetual social foreigners, which has led to this project. I have moved away from the spaces that nurtured me and the communities that huddled around my growth, and experienced new surroundings, new institutions, new communities. Yet, no matter where I go, there is a cloud that follows me, a cloud of hyper awareness of who I am and where I am, a cloud that forms a shadow over my movements; this cloud is a reminder of the precariousness of my belonging in this country. It has grown as I have grown, changed colors and density, but never fully cleared, never fully allowed the light above to envelope me completely, perhaps even growing heavier with time. I doubt it will ever truly float away. And this realization was ultimately the genesis of my research, the deciding factor in diving into the crux of the concept of identity, particularly its relationship to a broader sense of belonging.

For second generation Arab American Muslims like myself, a reconciling of numerous dualities results in an ever present seesaw ride, or tug of war. A sense of liminality becomes inevitable, for we will never fully occupy one identity other the other, seeing as both emerged alongside the other like twisting vines, forming one indiscernible gaggle with two distinct types of leaves. The question is not to decide or pick one identity, albeit my participants’ tether to religion and

particularities of their cultures and ethnicities certainly proved stronger than their attachment to anything they consider “American.” For choosing one would be reductive, a sacrifice that does not take into consideration the influences of one identity over the other. Thus, inconclusivity emerges as the overwhelming answer to the question of identity formation, for being the child of two foreign born parents, you are born in a land made to be your home yet not quite, operating on two languages and two planes, the private and the public, which intrinsically trains you *only* for the balancing of between: White and Other, White and Black, Arab and American, Muslim and American, American or not. There will never be one identity without the other, as was clear by my participants' responses and our discussions. What remains of a formation of identity and formation of belonging is a formation of the ability to balance, a maintenance of seamless transit between all the different landscapes one occupies, literally and otherwise. Muslim, Arab, American-- these labels, their implications and their expectations can come to overshadow the being occupying them, ironically reversing the sense of agency one should feel in being able to determine their distinct sense of self within the context of their surroundings. My participants have voices; they are beings of their own, with stories of their own. This project is a means of illuminating their stories, bringing to the fore the *real* people behind these often misconstrued, politically charged labels. For as much as they are significant, they should not be essentializing, or all defining. And like Fatima told me towards the end of our discussion, “I know who I am as a person... I’m so much more than a scarf that covers my head.”

Appendices

A. Definitions

1. Identity: "... the sense of self, is social and relational: our sense of who we are depends on and is the consequence of belonging to a society and participating in its culture."
2. Race: "an unstable complex of social meanings attached to human bodies..."⁶² (make more specific)⁶³
3. Ethnicity: "A social identity based on attributional dimensions... like language, descent, etc."⁶⁴
4. White: According to the United States Census Bureau, the White racial category is defined as classifying "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa."⁶⁵ The Bureau defines these racial categories as a reflection of "social race" accepted in the United States today.
 - 4.1. Whiteness: In the way I employ the term, it will mean the following: A set of socially prescribed privileges that manifest themselves in everyday and professional advantages in life, or a "social citizenship."⁶⁶ These privileges are associated with acquiring or adhering to one or more of the following variables: white skin/european features, white racial identification, American citizenship, or

⁶² Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, 1st ed, Arab American Writing (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

⁶³ I acknowledge the far too general nature of this definition. But the generality of this definition serves the generality of race as it pertains to my demographic.

⁶⁴ Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, 1st ed, Arab American Writing (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ US Census Bureau, "About Race," The United States Census Bureau, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>.

⁶⁶ "Are Arabs White? | United States | Al Jazeera," accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/16/are-arabs-white/>.

being an ‘American,’ and/or anglo-saxon religious affiliation. *An individual may attempt to obtain or assimilate into these markers but still experience rejection.* A group or individual does not need to acquire all these features, but can shape their life in a way that ascribes to these variables in varying degrees.

5. **Arab:** an individual descending from or directly from any of the following countries:

“There is no consensus on which countries make up the Middle East, but the core countries include the following geographical clusters: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza), Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania.”⁶⁷

5.1. Arab American: I will use this term interchangeably to reference the population of Arabs who are particularly second generation children, born in the United States, and whose parents immigrated from their mother country to the States

6. **MENA:** an acronym which stands for “Middle Eastern and North African.” This acronym will be used interchangeably with the term Arab, generally indicating that I am referencing individuals from any of the Arab nations, regardless of their immigration status. And although not all Arabs or individuals from Arab countries are Muslim, my project employs these terms to refer to my Muslim Arab participants.

⁶⁷ Anny P. Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 66-67.

B. Survey Questions

Race/Culture/Ethnicity

1. Overall, how would you describe your racial identity?
 - a. Do you identify as white? Do you identify as black?
 - i. If neither, how would you identify yourself?
 - b. Briefly describe what whiteness means to you.
2. What is your ethnicity or ethnic identity?
3. Can you tell me a bit about your cultural background, meaning tell me a bit about your ideals, values, language, etc.?
 - a. Where did your parents emigrate from?
 - i. How relevant do you believe their “immigrant experience” is to your identity?
 1. Would you classify your identity as “immigrant?”
 - b. Describe how you were raised.
 - i. What language(s) was used in the home?
 - ii. Who are you friends with today?
4. What values are most important to your family?
 - i. Which values are more important to your parents: those of racial identity, or “Arabness,” or those of religion and Islam?
5. Are you close to your native/home culture?
 - a. Are you in contact with family overseas?
 - b. Have you traveled to your native country?
 - i. If so, how often?

Religion

1. Generally, please describe how you practice Islam?
 - a. Do you celebrate Muslim holidays?
 - b. Describe any other relevant practices.
2. Would you call yourself a devout Muslim?
3. What do you believe is more important: being an Arab, or being Muslim?
 - a. Are these identities one in the same?
 - b. If not, how are they different?
4. What is your parents’ attitude towards religion?
5. What is your personal attitude towards religion?
 - a. **Gender in Religion**
 - i. In what ways do you think Islam influences your role in your family?
 - ii. Would you say there are gender differences present in the way Islam is taught?
 - iii. Describe the ways you see religion influencing gender roles and expectations in your personal experience.

1. Has Islam influenced your parents' expectations of you, both inside and outside of the family?
 - a. How does Islam influence your marital, educational, and career oriented aspirations?

Assimilation

1. Do you consider yourself an American?
2. Do you consider your parents Americans?
3. How would you define what it means to be a full American?
4. Describe your parents' process of living in America, if you can.
 - a. Do you think they have assimilated, meaning, have they integrated and "fit in?"
 - b. What neighborhood do you live in?
 - c. Where did you attend highschool? Elementary?
 - d. Describe your schooling experience.
 - i. Did you feel excluded or discriminated against?
5. What are your future goals for a career?
 - a. Have you or your parents experienced discrimination in any workplace?
6. Do you think you fit into American society?
 - a. If not, what factors of your identity contribute to feeling "unAmerican?"
7. In general, how do you see your identity affecting your everyday life?
 - a. In other words, how does your identification, either racially, ethnically, culturally, etc. affect your interactions with other people daily, your friendships and more?
Describe to me whatever feels most relevant and comfortable to your experience.

Demographic:

1. Please state your name.
2. How old are you?
3. Where did you live in New York City?

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