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Reporting Identity: Social and Political Implications of Adding a MENA Category to the U.S. Census

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Reporting Identity:

Social and Political Implications of Adding a MENA Category to the U.S. Census

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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To my grandfather, Mohamed.

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Introduction

When I was eleven years old, my family moved to a small town in Michigan and I started a new Middle School. On the first day, when we were assigned lockers outside our homeroom class, I met some of my new classmates.

“I’ve never seen you before,” said one boy, “where are you from?” he added.

“Yeah I’m new here,” I responded, “I moved here from Minnesota.”

“Okay but where are you *from from*,” he probed, “you have such a weird last name.” I was not unused to being asked this or a variation of this question, so I began telling the tale I always kept in my pocket, the story of my parent’s ethnicities.

“Oh, well my dad is half British and half Sudanese, and my mom is half German and other white European things.”

“What’s Sudanese?” he asked.

“From Sudan,” I responded, again not unused to explaining, “It’s in Africa.” Another boy who had been hovering nearby added,

“Oh I know where that is. So is your dad a terrorist?”

I can still remember my face feeling hot, and the intense fascination on the boys’ faces. I felt an unsettling combination of shock, indignance, and shame all at once, a mixture of emotions that would surface again many times. With the boys snickering near me, I felt crudely set apart from my peers in a way I hadn’t experienced to that extreme before. It was this instance that I discovered there was an association game being played, but I didn’t understand how it worked yet.

Moments like this- some much less abrasive- have informed the way I see myself in relation to other people. I grew up without much knowledge of my father’s Sudanese Arab culture, and because of this, I did not understand why or how I could be associated with any broader group of people based on an ethnicity I didn’t connect with myself. I kept navigating

conversations and questions about race and ethnicity over and over again, repeating the same explanation to strangers and wondering what associations were going to be made next. What was asked in person was also asked on paper, and I found negotiating these questions particularly strange on surveys; there never seemed to be a good option. After asking my parents early on, I settled on marking both boxes white/Caucasian and black/African American or Other if there wasn't an option to select multiple categories. It wasn't until highschool that I began to think critically about the categories and the language I use to describe my identity.

It was through an interest in race categories that I learned about the potential addition of a new identity category to the 2020 census called Middle Eastern or North African, or MENA for short. This news was startling for sure- I thought to myself: *this seems important. If this passes, should I start marking this? Is this box for me?*

As I read various news articles about the topic, I felt as though I was watching an identity being created in front of me. I have often identified as North African, but never associated my Sudanese heritage with the Middle East in the way the separate category seemed to do. The U.S. Census Bureau (CB) considers Sudan to be part of North Africa, but the MENA label brings the Middle East and North Africa into one sweeping group. Until now, people from this region have been considered "white" by the federal government since the early 1900s, when court cases fought by Syrian immigrants established a white identity, which allowed them to avoid legal discrimination based on race. Before World War II, immigrants from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire were considered Asian during a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 ruled that Asians were not allowed to become citizens, as well as other anti-Asian laws that segregated and discriminated against Asian people. This period in the U.S. was also

characterized by the Jim Crow Laws, segregation, and drastic discrimination against people of African descent. Immigrants from present day Syria and Lebanon then had to assert that they were not Asian so they could be allowed citizenship, but also that they were not black so that they could avoid discrimination and be protected by the same rights as white people. Through naturalization cases in the early to mid 1900s such as *Dow v. United States* and *Ex Parte Mohriez*,¹ a “white” identity label was won for Syrian immigrants which they could report on the U.S. census.²

The “white” race label does not make sense as a descriptor for all Middle Easterners and North Africans, however, because people from the region may identify with different races. My late grandfather from Sudan, for example, was black; categorizing him as “white” because of the region where he happened to be from would be entirely inappropriate. In addition, people from the region have experienced racialization, which makes the “white” label doubly inapplicable.

There are obvious problems with declaring all people of Middle Eastern and North African descent to be white. Depending on where a person’s ancestry is from, the color of their skin, or how a family or community has identified themselves historically, the categories for Asian, Black, or another identifier may fit someone better. The fact of the matter is that many Middle Eastern and North African people are othered by society and discriminated against, all the while supposedly maintaining a white identity. International relations and the War on Terror has shifted the way Americans look at people of Middle Eastern and North African descent and

¹ Khaled A. Beydoun, "Boxed In: Reclassification of Arab Americans on the U.S. Census as Progress or Peril?" *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 47 (April 7, 2016): 706, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/law/students/publications/lj/pdfs/vol47/issue3/Beydoun.pdf>.

² Randa Kayyali, "US Census Classifications and Arab Americans: Contestations and Definitions of Identity Markers," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 8 (2013): 1301, doi:10.1080/1369183x.2013.778150.

helped shape an anti-muslim, anti-arab sentiment in the U.S. Even before the post 9/11 political climate, people of Middle Eastern and North African descent found difficulty with a “white” label when they were not treated as such, shown in the *St. Francis Coll. v. Al-Khazraji* case, in which an Iraqi-American professor went to court with his former employer to argue that he had been denied tenure due to racial discrimination.^{3 4} Following 9/11, anti-Arab sentiment increased, and many Middle Eastern and North African Americans have become concerned about racial profiling and how census data might encourage it. However, different organizations such as the Arab American Institute (AAI) and American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), noted an undercount of Arab Americans, and began campaigning for a better census enumeration of people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent.

As a result of the campaigns, the CB has been considering adding a new category to the census that would better fit the population of Middle Easterners and North Africans in the United States. The category may be presented similarly to the Hispanic/Latino Origins category, which is currently the only given ethnicity option on the survey. The CB held a forum on May 29th, 2015 to discuss plans to test a category called Middle Eastern or North African, or MENA.⁵ Research on the category and positive feedback made it seem likely that MENA would appear on the 2020 census, but in January the CB announced that it needs further research.

Along with uncertainty about the trajectory of the category, there is also uncertainty as to how people might respond to the new census option. There is a large privacy concern intertwined

³ "Saint Francis College v. Al-Khazraji," Oyez. Accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1986/85-2169>.

⁴ Kayyali, "US Census Classifications," 1307.

⁵ Karen Humes, "Library," Forum on Ethnic Groups from the Middle East and North Africa, May 29, 2015, accessed April 28, 2018.

<https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2015/demo/2015-MENA-Experts.html>.

with census data collection on race and ethnicity, and MENA in particular, because “with policies and political rhetoric that are anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim, some worry the MENA census category might be used against the very people it's supposed to include.”⁶ In addition, whether someone identifies as Middle Eastern or North African may not coincide with the CB’s working classification of the category. In this work, I attempt to connect MENA as an identity category to a web of history, theory, current events and public concerns related to the following questions: What are the social and political implications of including a MENA category on the U.S. census? What does the movement to add a MENA identifier to the census tell us about the conceptualization of Middle Eastern and North African identity in America?

In order to explore the scope and viability of the MENA category, I draw from a variety of sources including scholarly work on the census and racial and ethnic categorization, Census Bureau findings, news articles, and information published by stakeholder organizations. A large portion of my data however, comes from first person accounts. I conducted in-depth interviews with members of my network to get the data that cannot be captured by quantitative research methods: how people of Middle Eastern and North African descent experience the task of navigating U.S. standardized race and ethnic categories. I am aware that interviews are not commonly relied upon in political research, but I share the belief with researchers such as Robert Pekkanen and Erik Bleich that they provide a valuable source of evidence that is overlooked and discounted.⁷

⁶ Kat Chow, "For Some Americans Of MENA Descent, Checking A Census Box Is Complicated," NPR, March 11, 2017. Accessed April 28, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/11/519548276/for-some-arab-americans-checking-a-census-box-is-complicated>.

⁷ Erik Bleich and Robert Pekkanen, "HOW TO REPORT INTERVIEW DATA," In *Interview Research in Political Science*, edited by Mosley Layna, 84. (ITHACA; LONDON: Cornell University Press, 2013) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1xx5wg.9>.

To conduct my interviews, I used the recommendations of participants to expand my network. Part of this research is an attempt to understand what's unsettling for people of Middle Eastern and North African descent about questions on race and ethnicity as they appear on surveys in the U.S. I wanted to understand the factors behind this unsettling phenomenon, not recreate them; therefore, I chose not to recruit strangers for the same reason it would have been inappropriate to gather data for this work using a survey. I reached out to a total of eight individuals and had one nonresponse, and the resulting interviews were structured, voice-recorded and ranged from fifteen to forty-five minutes long. For confidentiality purposes, I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of each participant. My sample consisted of four students and two middle-aged adults with a Middle Eastern and/or North African background, and one student with a white European background for reference. The interviews were essential to understanding the implications of the MENA category because they exposed some of the otherwise hidden concerns and circumstances at play in the identification of Middle Eastern and North African individuals in the U.S. The participants' understandings of racial and ethnic categorization take us beyond the census and into related issues of discrimination, trust in the government, self identification and more, all of which are involved in shaping MENA as a new identity label in the U.S. I am not using the interviews as though they represent the American Middle Eastern and North African community, but rather as individual experiences that reveal overlooked and misunderstood social circumstances involved in the formation of a MENA category.

Though the CB has left us unsure as to where the MENA category stands for future censuses, I study the MENA category as one unfolding example of larger changes that have

taken place in recent history with regard to standardized identification of race and ethnicity. Placing the MENA category in context with important developments to the census helps us imagine what could change with more accurate data of North African and Middle Eastern people living in the U.S. By looking at how past changes to the census were realized, it will be easier to understand why the MENA category is important, how it could affect people of Middle Eastern and North African descent, and what this change may reflect about American conceptualization of race and ethnicity.

Before diving into trends of racial and ethnic identification on the census, it is important to have a clear picture of what the census does. It is safe to say that most people do not understand the full functions of the U.S. census, the scope of which are so wide that it is unsurprising that the exhaustive workings of the census are not common knowledge. I had no idea how complex and multifaceted the uses of census data were until I came across a New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development website page titled “50 Ways Census Data are Used.” The website lists an incredible array of topics including media use, business concerns, and my personal favorite: “decision making at all levels of government.”⁸ I was surprised to find that, aside from a few exceptions, there is little work that tries to expose the ways in which the census interacts with the lives of Americans in an accessible way.

If census data are used for decision making at all levels of government, then the information the CB collects must be extremely important- and therefore so must be the questions that appear on the survey. As a response to finding a lack of approachable information about how the census affects the individuals it serves, in the following chapter I will attempt a brief

⁸ "50 Ways Census Data Are Used," State of New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, accessed April 28, 2018, <http://www.nj.gov/labor/lpa/census/2010/50WaysDataUsed.html>.

overview of the historical and contemporary purposes of the census. Next, I will analyze MENA as a panethnic category and a census development that can be compared to two major changes to the census: the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins category and the option to select multiple races. Both additions to the census show the power of minority communities to demand better recognition and enumeration from the government, which, when analyzed next to the MENA category, forms a greater narrative about the act of reporting identity. To better study the implications of categorizing people from the MENA region, I have interviewed individuals of varying backgrounds from the Middle East and North Africa, whose personal accounts provide important and often overlooked insight in a discussion about the importance of statistical data on race. I will then address the issue of balance between privacy and better data through an analysis of the particular concerns that a potential MENA category brings to the discussion. Finally, I will examine the ways that standardized race and ethnic categories influence the way communities and individuals identify themselves, as well as vice-versa.

Chapter 1: What Does the Census Do?

Constitutional Beginnings

The Census was originally created for enumeration purposes as spelled out in the Constitution of the United States. When the framers of the constitution drew out the guidelines that would characterize a new republic with a federal government as well as independent state governments, they looked for a way to determine the leadership in the centralized body.⁹ This concern was greatly debated among the framers, especially between those who represented smaller states versus larger states, as it was unclear how the size of a particular state would play out in federal government. On a basic level, “the large resented the equal voting authority of the small in Congress; the small feared the bullying of the large,”¹⁰ but it was decided that population should have a role in deciding representatives to the government. To satisfy this concern, the framers designed a legislative branch that is made up of two bodies: the Senate, which gives equal representation to each state, and the House of Representatives, which is decided based on population.

The framers created the decennial census to solve the issue of apportionment, or the way in which legislative power is distributed between the states by population. It was written in the constitution that the House of Representatives be apportioned by “their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those

⁹ Kenneth Prewitt, *What Is Your Race?: The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 38.

¹⁰ Margot J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History*, 2nd ed, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 8.

bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.”¹¹ The idea was that the census would count each state’s population, which would then determine how many delegates a state would get out of the total seats in the House of Representatives. However, this “democratic” idea was corrupted by the fact that those who established the guidelines of governance did not view all people as equal. The constitutional clause mentioned above explicitly determined who counted as a person on the census based on race. In order to study any facets of the contemporary census that pertain to race, it is necessary to understand that from the beginning, the census in the United states was tied to racism.

The dehumanizing clause had great impact on the new government, because it added representational power to states with large slave populations, yet slaves could not vote. In fact, some argued that the 3/5ths clause changed the result of the 1800 presidential election because of its effect on the electoral college.¹² In simple terms, the way the United States approached race with the census had a direct effect on how power was distributed in the country. The 3/5ths clause was abolished along with slavery in 1865,¹³ but that certainly wasn’t the end of the conflict between racial and ethnic identification and census proceedings. As the CB website delicately puts it:

Censuses are not conducted in a vacuum. They occur amidst internal and external crisis, shifts in cultural interests, and events that become "defining moments" for each generation. Census data reflect the growth of the population as well as the changing values and interests of the American people.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 78

¹⁴ Census History Staff, “Fast Facts,” U.S. Census Bureau, Last revised July 11, 2017, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/

Another constitutionally delegated task of the census was to provide the population count necessary for redistricting purposes. Redistricting is the process by which legislators draw the boundaries that define an area of voters which make up a district. The districts are drawn around equal populations, which is why census data are key; however, legislators have historically manipulated this task in a method that came to be known as “Gerrymandering.” The process consists of drawing districts in such a way as to give a legislator an upper hand. By grouping certain populations together or excluding others, legislators used redistricting to effectively choose their electorate, and it was up to each state to determine how this process was carried out.

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Federal Aid Programs

As time went on, the resources necessary to organize, prepare, retrieve and tabulate an expanding census continued to grow, which led to the establishment of the CB in 1902.¹⁶ In the 20th century, the information requested of census-takers became more and more specific, and certainly moved beyond apportionment for representatives and redistricting. Most notably, when the Great Depression devastated the U.S. economy, government workers relied on census data to measure the socioeconomic status of Americans in the effort to help struggling citizens and repair the broken economy.¹⁷ Under President Roosevelt, The New Deal programs delivered resources to areas of the U.S. based on information recorded in the survey. “Roosevelt’s Brains

¹⁵ Erik J. Engstrom, "Districting and the Construction of Early American Democracy," In *Partisan Gerrymandering and the Construction of American Democracy*, 21-42, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gk086k.5>.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau Staff. “Agency History.” U.S. Census Bureau. Last revised July 11, 2017. https://www.census.gov/history/www/census_then_now/

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “Factfinder for the Nation: History and Organization,” Issued May, 2000, <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/cff4.pdf>.

Trustees and advisers desperately needed to know were particular programs were to be targeted, how many people would need farm aid, how many work relief, how many general relief.”¹⁸ The New Deal programs changed the role of the CB, as the census statistical data began to be used to support huge grant-in-aid programs like the Social Security Act and other welfare programs. The New Deal set a precedent for the use of census data, and the federal government continued to rely on the surveys as new programs began and existing ones continued to expand. Congress introduced all sorts of programs at the state and local level that relied on census statistics for the allocation of federal support, including:

...school lunch programs (1946), airport construction (1946), hospital construction(1946), and water pollution control (1948). In the 1950s and 1960s, the grant-in-aid program was used to supply federal funds for the interstate highway system, housing assistance, antipoverty programs, employment and training programs, urban redevelopment, and water and sewer projects.¹⁹

Protection of Civil Rights

The 1960s Civil Rights movement brought several laws that sought to end discrimination and promote equality in the United States, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Each of these laws made it illegal to discriminate against people based on their race, religion, sex, or national origins. Under these laws, black americans and other minorities were to be protected in their right to vote, work, and live free of discrimination, and the federal government was to enforce these protections.²⁰ The U.S. census took on a new role in this era as it began to support the objective of ensuring that civil rights were protected for minorities. For example, census data became key in monitoring the

¹⁸ Anderson, *The American Census*, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

states that implemented literacy tests at voting sites; the government used the count of eligible voting age individuals to prove that states using literacy tests with low voter turnout were violating the 15th amendment.²¹ Another example of the way census data became central in civil rights protections dealt with the redistricting objective discussed earlier; malapportioned districts that were drawn as a result of gerrymandering effectively silenced the voices of black and minority voters. Congress used census data as a way to see which districts were engaging or had a history of engaging in voter discrimination.

Census Undercount of Racial and Ethnic Minorities

By the 1960s, it became apparent that there was a problem of census undercount and that it disproportionately missed minorities. “In 1950, 11.5% of blacks were missed, in 1960, 9.5 percent. By comparison, only 2.2 percent of whites were missed in 1960.”²² Undercount can be explained by several factors that make it difficult to reach a population with a census survey, including level of english literacy, unfamiliarity with surveys, and location of housing.²³ Researchers Leslie A. Brownrigg and Manuel de la Puente identify “mobility, language problems, concealment, irregular relationship to head of household, and resistance to government interaction” as possible hindrances to census enumeration.²⁴ The problem with undercount is that all those federal grant-in-aid projects listed earlier rely on accurate census data to determine how much need there is for a particular program, how much funding the programs will require, and

²¹ Ibid., 215.

²² Ibid., 208.

²³ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 112, s.v. "Coverage Evaluation," by Michael L. Cohen.

²⁴ Ibid.

where to send it. Large numbers of minorities in the U.S. were not counted in earlier censuses, and therefore did not receive the resources provided by federal aid programs, nor voting rights enforcement. With these undercount statistics, it is apparent how the statistical information on race or ethnicity is necessary for the successful implementation of government efforts that pursue equal opportunity. The issue of census undercount has improved greatly, although undercount is still an important factor that particularly affects minorities. The 2010 census undercounted 2.1 percent of the black population, 1.5 percent of the Hispanic/latino population, and 4.9 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives living on reservations.²⁵

What the push for the MENA category suggests is that there is an undercount of people of Middle Eastern or North African descent in the country. The American Community Survey, an extensive survey conducted by the CB that is given to 3 million randomly selected households, estimates the Arab population in the country at around 1.7 million people, but the Arab American Institute believes this number is markedly undercounted.²⁶ This is largely due to the fact that, because of the history of the Asian Exclusion Act, the population has largely been marking themselves as “white” on the census. When individuals choose “white” because there is no separate indicator for Middle Eastern and North African identity, it provides misleading data about the corresponding population. The result is the undercount of Middle Eastern and North African people with potentially different needs than the majority population, needs that are unseen on the decennial census. The Arab American institute identifies health, employment,

²⁵ US Census Bureau Public Information Office, "Newsroom Archive," Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2010 Census - 2010 Census - Newsroom - U.S. Census Bureau, (May 19, 2016), Accessed April 28, 2018, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html.

²⁶ Nadeem Istfan, "U.S. Census Undercounts MENA Population," *Arab American Institute* (blog), (June 06, 2014), accessed February 28, 2018, http://www.aaiusa.org/u_s_-census-undercounts-mena-population.

education, and voting rights as areas where inadequate census data disadvantages the Middle Eastern and North African population. A new MENA ethnic category would mean better funding for school districts with large populations of english language learners, protection of Americans of MENA descent from discriminatory hiring practices, language assistance at polling places, and more.²⁷

Census Data on Race and Ethnicity Today

The contemporary uses of the decennial census data are impressive. Since its first appearance in 1790, the census questions have gotten more comprehensive, detailed, and are used for much more than just purposes of apportionment as it was delineated in the constitution. The census today is a statistical behemoth, a function of the government that seems obscure and inaccessible to the people it serves. When it comes to questions on race and ethnicity, people often do not understand why they are being asked. Layla, a Lebanese student at a small U.S. college, is mystified by the census questions on race and ethnicity. “I never know why they ask me,” she says, “I never know what they’re going to use the information for, if it’s better for me to specify or just to put white, or...and I wish I knew why they’d be asking these questions.”

Similarly to Layla, a student of Ethiopian and Yemeni descent named Ahmed who attends college on the East Coast, is also unclear about what the data are for. This leads him to feel skeptical of the collection of data about his racial and ethnic identification:

Ahmed: I think it’s weird though like when you apply... let’s say you go to a doctor’s appointment or like you go to buy something and they’re asking these questions, ‘cause what does race have to do with you buying something or getting treated for something? I think that’s just like...again like ‘Oh we support this and this and that’, uh, but I think for me personally I wouldn’t mind specifying if it’s like for a nonprofit or something that’s

²⁷ Arab American Institute, "Adding a MENA Category to the U.S. Census," May 06, 2015, accessed April 28, 2018, <http://www.aaiusa.org/2020census>.

like...I guess useful to have race being collected as a data source. But at the same time, like going back to that question [of] what is ethical or not, like where is this data set being held, placed in? What are they using it for? I think it's crucial cause it's like, I mean, from a perspective of like marketing, corporates sometimes pay money to actually get into the surveys that you apply to. They pay money to look at how many people applied and what kind of race- that's all it is for technically. Yeah, I don't know.

Ahmed recognizes that the data can be useful, but on the other hand, he expresses distrust in the CB. His lack of trust stems from not feeling informed about what the data are used for, in combination with an understanding of how statistical data on race is used by the private sector in our capitalist economy. His comment about feeling more comfortable expressing his ethnicity for nonprofits suggests that he worries about who is collecting the data, and how users of the data may be profiting from his responses. It may sound ironic, but Americans do not feel informed about the census, whose self described mission is “to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation’s people and economy.”²⁸ Asking individuals to respond to surveys without clearly stating where the information will go is a strange concept that can make data collection on race and ethnicity particularly concerning, an issue I will discuss further in Chapter 3. Transparency is key to building trust, therefore it is important to identify some of the basic contemporary functions of the census so individuals can frame their responses to it, and consider the implications of new developments on the survey.

Today, the scope of census data reaches beyond federal aid programs and the enforcement of civil rights laws. According to the New Jersey Department of Labor webpage, the uses of census data are as varied as predicting transportation needs in communities, facilitating scientific research, and drawing school district boundaries. These tasks and programs

²⁸ US Census Bureau, "About the Bureau," U.S. Census Bureau at a Glance, (October 24, 2017), accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/about/what/census-at-a-glance.html>.

add up; the U.S. CB website states that census data are used to distribute 675 billion dollars of funding to local governments.²⁹ The total exhaustive functions of census data cannot be covered in this analysis, so I chose to summarize the uses of census data on race and ethnicity with four categories: the private sector, government decision-making, research, and standardization.

Private Sector

Data are used in the private sector to analyze local trends, make business decisions and create jobs. Indeed, the Division of Research and Statistical Services of the South Carolina Budget and Control Board estimated that businesses make up 35% of the total requests for census data that South Carolina receives each year.³⁰ Census data can be analyzed to produce maps and consumer profiles that allow businesses to learn about and target the consumers in a particular area and compete with other businesses. The maps can include information such as the racial makeup of an area by zip code or the income levels of different communities, and the consumer profiles can include any relevant information which might allow businesses to locate and target marketing strategy in specific areas. The National Research Council identifies a wide array of businesses that employ census data to help them in their ventures including retail stores and restaurants, banks and financial institutions, media and advertising firms, insurance and utility companies, attorneys, real estate firms, healthcare providers, and nonprofit organizations.

I think it is important to note how intertwined census operations and our capitalist economic system are, and what this means especially when we look at the categories of race and

²⁹ US Census Bureau, "About the Bureau," What We Do, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/about/what.html>.

³⁰ National Research Council, *Modernizing the U.S. Census*, ed. Barry Edmonston and Charles Schultze (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1995): 293, <https://doi.org/10.17226/4805>.

origins. If census data are used by businesses to target consumers and market towards communities, how do businesses change their marketing approaches when new categories of race or ethnicity appear on the census? One way to approach this question and explore the interaction between businesses and statistical data on race and ethnicity is to look at the way the private sector uses data on the Hispanic/Latino population. Information about where Latino communities are clustered and the size of the populations “are important for Spanish-language advertising and communications, merchandising, and product placement.”³¹ Thanks to census data, the private sector has been able to track the patterns of growth and settlement of the Hispanic/Latino population, which helps businesses to capitalize on their buying power. To give a concrete example, Joan Gentili Naymark and Ken Hodges write that census information on your race or ethnicity may have played a part in what soda you may buy at the store:

Combining census data with company information about customers further enhances business plans and sales goals. Young white nonhispanic children prefer different soft drinks than do seniors or Hispanic populations, and companies can use census data on the age or ethnicity of local populations to help them target product offerings in local stores or restaurants.³²

This is not only the case for Latinos but also for other minority groups; researchers Jeffrey A. Will, Sharon C. Cobb and Timothy J. Cheney note that “as minority groups continue to grow in population, wealth, and buying power, it becomes imperative that businesses understand the differences among different segments of the population that will be consuming their products.”³³

³¹ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 347, s.v. "Private Sector," by Joan Gentili Naymark, Ken Hodges, and Edward J. Spar.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Jeffrey A. Will, Sharon C. Cobb and Timothy J. Cheney, "Florida's Changing Rainbow: Identifying Emerging Markets Through the Examination of Racial Composition and Demographic Change in Florida," *Population Research and Policy Review* 27, no. 5 (2008): 500, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41217967>.

In other words, how you respond to the census race and ethnicity questions has an effect on what businesses and products are available, or perhaps more importantly, *not available* in the area where you live. Private sector use of census data can be an impressive example of the power of minority communities and the ways in which they demand recognition, yet at the same time, it presents another case of how America is entrenched in statistical data on race and ethnicity. If a MENA category is added to the census, how will the private sector attempt to capitalize on information about Middle Eastern and North African communities? Where marketing in Spanish is one technique used to reach Hispanic and Latino communities, would Arabic be used to reach MENA populations? Maybe we should be hopeful that businesses will learn from changing census data that there is complexity and nuance to racial and ethnic identification, and that this will, in turn, influence the perception of race at the institutional level.

Government Decision-making

Census data are used by all levels of government to assess the demographic breakdown of American populations. Government officials use this data to make decisions that affect their constituencies, such as how to develop social service programs, determine school districts, plan for natural disasters, and create jobs. In order to plan any program to help a community, governments need to understand their districts so they know where best to implement it. For example, census data about where immigrant communities live are crucial for governments to direct programs that will help people with lower english language ability to access government services. In order to best help these communities, the most accurate data are necessary, which can be difficult to achieve in hard-to-reach areas. Cooperation between the CB and low level

government officials and community leaders is therefore extremely important to successful programming:

Local officials help the Census Bureau identify areas within their communities that may be difficult to count. They describe and locate areas where their residents experience linguistic isolation or have limited English-language ability, where new immigrants reside, and where the homeless congregate.³⁴

The federal aid programs and civil rights enforcement objectives noted earlier are also included in the contemporary ways local governments use census data. Many federal assistance programs have eligibility requirements, meaning that they are targeted towards certain populations in greatest need, such as low-income communities. Data from the decennial census and the American Community Survey give information on population characteristics such as poverty and unemployment, which are used to determine which communities are eligible for federal assistance.³⁵

Research

Census data are used by many social scientists and other researchers to study and explain what is happening to the American population. The decennial census contains valuable information about the demographic breakdown of the country, which is extremely useful to research and reports performed by public and private agencies and even students.³⁶ The census is a comprehensive survey that gathers information from all parts of the country and provides important statistical insight that can be used for a wide range of studies. These studies are

³⁴ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 388, s.v. "Uses of the Census and ACS: State and Local Governments," by Leonard M. Gaines, Linda Gage, and Joseph J. Salvo.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁶ National Research Council, *Modernizing the U.S. Census*, 259-260.

important to understanding the characteristics and needs of communities, and can then become the research that underlies policy that affects those communities. The National Research Council gives an example of the use of census data for research purposes in *Modernizing the U.S.*

Census:

Identification of patterns and rates of change allows projections into the future size, characteristics, and distribution of the population. These projections have fundamental importance to the formulation and evaluation of public policies... As an example, the nature and adequacy of the housing of particular groups can be assessed. Projections of the future size of the population, its household size, and its residential patterns together will present patterns of home ownership, and provide a basis for estimating the housing needs of the future for particular metropolitan and rural areas as well as for the nation.³⁷

The decision for a community to make changes or enact policy to meet housing needs can therefore potentially be sourced from census data. This is just one example of how important the data are to research, and by extension, to individuals who have something at stake in the research.

Race matters in this context because an important use of decennial census data are the study of racial residential segregation. Researchers can measure the concentration of different racial or ethnic groups in a particular area and examine changes over time since the last census was taken. This, in turn, allows researchers “to investigate the economic consequences of residential segregation, as well as to probe into racial attitudes and discriminatory practices that may promote different levels of racial segregation in various locales.”³⁸ Another example provided by The National Research Council is the use of census data in the study of poverty, which is deeply connected to race and ethnicity in the U.S. Researchers can investigate poverty

³⁷ Ibid., 265.

³⁸ Ibid., 264.

levels as they relate to particular ethnic groups, which is important to understand the practices that perpetuate this phenomenon and the obstacles in the way of progress.

Data for research can be bought from the CB, or obtained from an organization that processes and puts together a simpler version of the data such as the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research.³⁹ It is worth considering that if census data are made into a product that can be bought and sold, then what does this mean about the goals of the CB and the dissemination of the data it collects?

Setting Standards

Whether or not this is an indirect use of census data, it is important to note the impact that the decennial census survey has on other survey and alternative forms of data collection. The standardized questions on race and ethnicity used in the decennial census also appear in all kinds of other forms and surveys like applications to academic institutions, medical forms, job applications, and much more. My undergraduate institution, for instance, sent out a survey by email that asked first years and seniors about their college experience. One of the many questions in the 20-minute survey asked:

What is your racial or ethnic identification? (Select all that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other
- I prefer not to respond

³⁹ Ibid., 270.

The categories and question format on this survey and countless others are extremely close (if not identical) to the recent census questions on race and ethnicity. Why do so many forms ask the same information and provide similar categories to collect the information? The answer to this question has much to do with the Office of Management and Budget Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, which outlines standardized race categories to be used in all data collection for the entire federal government. This directive aimed to create comparable data and required all federal agencies to comply with the standards. Directive 15 was modified in 1997, and the following racial and ethnic classification minimums have gone unchanged since then:

- American Indian or Alaskan Native (including Central and South America)
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White

When the OMB revised Directive 15, it followed guidelines which maintained that “the number of standard categories should be kept to a manageable size, determined by statistical concerns and data needs” and that “a revised set of categories should be operationally feasible in terms of burden placed upon respondents; public and private costs to implement the revisions should be a factor in the decision.”⁴⁰ It is curious what the OMB means by a “manageable size” of racial and ethnic categories, and how the agency considers the “costs” of carrying out changes to the standards. The goal of the directive was to promote consistency in data collection across federal agencies; however, the standardized categories also filtered down into other data research and record keeping, advancing in areas such as the medical field and education system. The

⁴⁰ Office of Management and Budget, “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity,” October 30, 1997, (accessed Nov 24, 2017), https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards

national government is aware that standardizing race and ethnic categories in the U.S. has a wide ripple-effect on the country. In the 1997 Federal Register Notice that declared revisions to Directive 15, the OMB stated:

For more than 20 years, the current standards in OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 have provided a common language to promote uniformity and comparability for data on race and ethnicity for the population groups specified in the Directive...The standards are used not only in the decennial census...but also in household surveys, on administrative forms (e.g., school registration and mortgage lending applications), and in medical and other research. The categories represent a social-political construct designed for collecting data on the race and ethnicity of broad population groups in this country, and are not anthropologically or scientifically based.⁴¹

The decennial census may be conducted only once every ten years, but the adopted uses of the federally standardized race and ethnic categories are experienced much more frequently in American lives. In this way, we can see how the need for consistent data at the federal level creates a huge conformance process that endorses the census as a template for other data collection on identity. The OMB recognizes its role in creating a “common language” with which to study and discuss population groups, and that common language has really stuck. As C. Matthew Snipp notes in his article “Racial Measurement in the American Census: Past Practices and Implications for the Future,” social scientists have largely adhered to the categories established by the OMB as well. Indeed, my own analysis relies mostly on the same language that was solidified by the Directive 15 standards. I bring up the pervasiveness of the Directive 15 norms not to suggest that the Federal government was the sole producer of this language, and the next chapter should help explain how this is not the case. The point is to acknowledge the scope of census race and ethnic categories and their importance in our social environment, an

⁴¹ Office of Management and Budget, "Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity," National Archives and Records Administration, (October 30, 1997), accessed April 28, 2018, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards.

environment in which institutions influence the language we use to express identity, and shape which identities are widely recognized by American society.

Chapter 2: Creating Categories

When I first read about the MENA category, I felt destabilized by the prospect of a new category I might use to identify myself with. While the race and ethnicity categories I had been provided with in the past had never felt right, I had grown accustomed to selecting certain identifiers. I had never heard of the acronym before, and I was nervous about whether or not my heritage fell under that category, and how it might change my records or the way I marked the census from then on. This might sound trivial to some people, and indeed they may be thinking to themselves *it just isn't a big deal*. Certain individuals, on the other hand, might be thinking *finally!* Here lies part of the issue: this is a matter of identity as much as political and social outcomes. The way in which someone perceives this issue as important or unimportant may boil down to whether a person has something at stake in the matter. I don't know how to express my multi-ethnic identity to others in understandable terms unless I subscribe to the conventional race and ethnic categories that people ordinarily engage with; because of this, the MENA category, which may seem like an abstract statistical development to some, feels very real to me. Ibrahim, one of the college students I spoke with, is relatively new to the American standardized race and ethnic categories, and finds the options so unrelatable that he had to ask what he should select:

Ibrahim: It was actually just a survey I was taking through the internet, and I was just having fun with it and when it comes to the question "race" especially, I was looking for Middle Eastern and I didn't find it. So, at that time I even called my brother, he's been here longer than me...cause I'd never had this situation before happen to me. So I call him, like, "What are we? Like are we Asians, are we like white, what are we exactly?" So he told me that we are white...yeah that was a weird feeling.

Ibrahim's experience illustrates the way individuals must interact with race and ethnic categories to make their background understandable and summarizable for interested parties. In this example, the survey appears to be a casual online questionnaire, but the national census is no different; because of the way racial and ethnic categories have been delineated by the federal government, people of Middle Eastern and North African descent find themselves choosing between options they may not relate to.

For instance, I have never conflated my Sudanese Arab heritage with a Middle Eastern identity, but the MENA category brings North Africa and the Middle East together in a way that not everybody sees the two regions. There is no clear definition of the Middle East, evidenced by the fact that the boundary completely changes depending on who you ask. If you Google search a map of the Middle East you will get maps that look completely different from one another, sometimes including only Egypt and Libya from Africa, while other times including the entire northern part of the continent. These discrepancies bring up two central questions to consider MENA within the context of the U.S. census: who is the MENA category for, and how is that affiliation is determined?

Before answering these questions, it is critical to note that regardless of how we define where the Middle East stops and starts, America seems to have a false yet clear portrait of a person from the Middle East. Without even being able to identify what region of the world Arabs and Middle Easterners come from, Americans have othered people of Middle Eastern and North African descent in a clear contradiction to the way the federal government identifies this group of people on the United States census. Especially since 9/11, anti-Arab, anti-Middle Eastern sentiment has resulted in a sociopolitical climate in which people of Middle Eastern and North

African descent are racialized and often face discrimination. This process of othering has contributed to the identification of MENA as a separate group, along with mobilization from within the diverse communities that compose it.⁴²

Who is this Category For?

This question may seem simple at first, but there are several things to consider in any given response, such as: who is considered Middle Eastern or North African from the perspective of the Census Bureau or federal government? How does the government's definition of Middle Eastern or North African differ or align with the individuals and communities that actually identify as such? What factors are used to define the MENA category? To engage with these questions, I frame MENA as a panethnic category, because it brings together a diverse range of smaller groups into a larger collective. Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu established the term "panethnicity" through her work on Asian American identity and defines it as a "politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins."⁴³ Espiritu suggests that, regardless of distinct histories and identities, the heterogeneous ethnicities that form a panethnic group do so for the purpose of protecting and advancing common interests.⁴⁴

The formation of a panethnic identity does not aim to flatten the various identities and experiences of the included groups. Latino identity is another example of this bridging, not reducing, unity. For example, in a 1992 article called "*Hispanic*" and "*Latino*": *The Viability of*

⁴² Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Paul Ong, and Sarah Tosh, "Panethnicity Revisited: Contested Group Boundaries in the Post-9/11 Era," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 5 (2015): 730, accessed December 01, 2017, doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1081959.

⁴³ Yen Le. Espiritu, "Ethnicity and Panethnicity," in *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Categories for Panethnic Unity, José Calderón concludes the following of the label Latino and panethnic unity: “Although the Latino groups in the United States are somewhat diverse even internally, commonalities may sometimes be found around particular issues reflecting similar conditions of inequality.”⁴⁵ Likewise, Espiritu responds to the argument that Asian Americans are not a panethnic group because they are culturally dissimilar with the idea that Asian Americans are creating a common heritage out of different histories. “Part of the heritage being created hinges on what Asian Americans share: a history of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination,”⁴⁶ as well an awareness of being treated alike due to “their socially defined racial distinctiveness, or their imposed identity as ‘Asians’.”⁴⁷ Panethnic solidarity is thereupon created as a way to carve out a political space in a state that uses broad ethnic and racial categorization as a way to apportion political and economic resources.⁴⁸

The framework of panethnicity fits the movement to add a MENA category to the census because it attempts to gather together nationalities and groups with varying affinities into a larger collective to pursue common interest of representation. The CB’s working definition of the MENA category for the 2015 National Content Test, a national survey aimed at making improvements for the 2020 census, included the following nationalities and identities in its classification:

Algerian, Bahraini, Egyptian, Emirati, Iranian, Iraqi, Israeli, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Libyan, Moroccan, Omani, Palestinian, Qatari, Saudi Arabian, Syrian, Tunisian, Yemeni, Amazigh or Berber, Arab or Arabic, Assyrian, Bedouin, Chaldean, Copt, Druze, Kurdish, Middle Eastern, North African, and Syriac.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ José Calderón, ““Hispanic” and “Latino”: The Viability of Categories for Panethnic Unity,” *Latin American Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (1992): 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633843>.

⁴⁶ Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹ U.S. Census Bureau Population Division, *2015 Forum on Ethnic Groups from the Middle East and North Africa*, by Angela Buchanan, Magdaliz Álvarez Figueroa, and Rachel Marks (2016), 27, accessed

However, feedback from the National Content test shows differences in opinion about which groups should be included in the classification. Some people advocated for or against the inclusion of national identities such as Turkish, Sudanese, Somali and subnational or transnational identities such as Kurdish and Chaldean in the classification of MENA.⁵⁰

Though defining the region remains somewhat inconsistent, the CB found that the testing showed a separate Middle Eastern or North African category performed well.⁵¹ As the Arab American Institute (AAI) wrote in a 2017 brief on the issue, a meaningful ethnic category for people of Middle Eastern and North African descent “will have a positive impact on the treatment and services available to members of the Arab American community. The undercounting of Arab Americans has served as a barrier to representation, education, health, and employment for the community.”⁵² The AAI writes about the benefits of MENA census category for Arab Americans, but the barriers described above apply to more people from the region. The use of framing MENA as a panethnic category is that it is inclusive of those people who identify as Middle Eastern or North African but maybe not as Arab. Not everyone agrees with this frame, however; in an article called *Panethnicity Revisited: contested group boundaries in the post 9/11 era*, sociologists Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Paul Ong, and Sarah Tosh challenge the idea of an established MENA panethnicity:

Middle Eastern immigrants are one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse panethnic groups in America, yet they share cultural, linguistic and religious ties that cut

April 29, 2018,

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2015/demo/MENA-Forum-Summary-and-Appendices.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "2015 National Content Test Results," news release, February 28, 2017, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-tps15.html>.

⁵² Arab American Institute, "Adding a MENA Category to the U.S. Census."

across national boundaries. Generally, these immigrants identify themselves along national (e.g. Iranian, Israeli, Turkish), supranational or ethnic (e.g. Arab), or ethno-religious (e.g. Armenian, Jewish) categories (Bozorgmehr and Bakalian 2013).⁵³

The scholars agree that people of Middle Eastern and North African descent share the conditions that enable panethnic mobilization, especially due to post 9/11 backlash,⁵⁴ yet they find evidence that a MENA panethnic category has not developed. Instead, they suggest that groups like Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have engaged in defensive mobilization against the state for targeting these categories.⁵⁵ They also argue that certain groups from within the panethnic umbrella have organized in a way that emphasizes nationality or smaller group ties as a way to reject being lumped in with the targeted categories of ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American.’

⁵⁶ In addition, Bozorgmehr et al. bring up the importance of the varied political histories and ongoing conflicts that may complicate the willingness for individuals and groups to identify with other groups from the region.⁵⁷ A MENA category on the U.S. census, however, could have an impact on the language used to describe the diverse identities from the Middle Eastern and North African region, and may become more widely used both by institutions and individuals in the U.S., thus creating the panethnic identity that Bozorgmehr et al argue has not yet established itself. People from the Middle East and North Africa may identify any way they choose on forms, but if a MENA category were available, then subscribing to a larger panethnic category rather than a smaller group would carry more political weight in a state that apportions power and resources by population.

⁵³ Bozorgmehr et al, “Panethnicity Revisited,” 742.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Identifying oneself is not only political, however, it is also personal, and the MENA category has to make sense to the individuals that comprise it. One of the older adults I spoke with, Hafez, doesn't see MENA as a group that shares anything beyond location. "I'm pretty surprised this is a question about race or ethnicity, because evidently it is neither. It's just a geographical region," he says.

Hafez does, however, see people from the Middle Eastern and North African descent as commonly vulnerable in the United States: "Given the political climate...creating visibility for a group that is typically- even if it doesn't have actual coherence but is ultimately made up of vulnerable people- is not a bad thing." Hafez brings up the idea once again about shared vulnerability as a bridge that holds the MENA group together, an important trait in Espiritu's concept of panethnicity.

Some people of Middle Eastern and North African descent are already very comfortable with the idea of a MENA panethnic category. Abdu, for instance, is a middle aged man of Sudanese, Egyptian, Turkish, and White European ancestry now living near the West coast of the U.S. He first heard the term MENA when he was living in the United Arab Emirates, and found that it expressed both his identity and a larger picture of interconnectedness across the Middle Eastern and North African region:

Abdu: MENA means to me...and I've used this, I've lived in Dubai, and it was all...everything was written about MENA, and it talked about an area of the world which sort of... everybody felt a part of. It was a good connection. MENA also helps define the sort of the migratory and interconnectivity of the region, you know? It was used to describe the region, and it was also used by the government, you know, like "people travelling in the MENA region." That was a defined area which crossed countries, continents, it was borderless, this MENA. It was just an area, like saying South Asia or something to that effect. It defined a set of values and cultures that were all very very shared and understood. It made sense, it had a lot of meaning to it. And a lot of people were using it- it became a catchphrase. And that was 6 or 7 years ago, and I hadn't heard of it before that. The surprising thing is, I identify more MENA even though by this

census, by that sheet, I'm you know, 75% white, I still...I recognize myself with MENA before I would recognize myself with white.

In his experience with the term MENA, Abdu finds a kind of solidarity across a vast region that centers around known values and cultures. To him, MENA is useful as a way to describe the ties across the region, and it didn't feel imposed- it was a popular term used as a "catchphrase".

While Abdu finds the category meaningful in describing what is shared across the MENA region, Grace, an undergraduate student at a liberal arts college on the northeast, sees the category as an important way to highlight difference on surveys:

Grace: There's a complicated layer of the Arab world being multiracial and multiethnic, too, and so that's why I think it's important to have the Middle East and North Africa category cause that sort of captures the complexity, right, of the region as not totally an Arab region, but as one that has other groups in it. It affords them the opportunity to share that territory and have multiple claims to identity there. That's why I tend to, when I fill out forms, I won't say Jordanian or Palestinian or Arab, cause I also have Aramaean christian roots too which some people say is a different ethnicity, other people say they became Arabized... there's conflicting claims to what constitutes that identity, so that's why I like to say Middle East and North Africa.

For Grace, a MENA category is important to describing the variation that exists within the region, and allows her to do the same with her composite personal identity. Though Abdu and Grace approach the use and meaning of MENA as a category differently, they both suggest that the term MENA is important to describing identity. Whether highlighting shared values or expressing the heterogeneous groups across the region, MENA appears to be a category that suits both tasks where other identifiers do not.

This census development attempts to address the undercounted and vulnerable population of Middle Eastern and North African people who are hidden behind the standardized race categories in place. Throughout census history, there have been many attempts to address undercounted and unrecognized minority populations, and relatively recent changes have altered

modern data collection on race and ethnicity in ways that broke census convention. The addition of the option to select multiple races and the Hispanic/Latino origins question are two changes that stirred up the way data on race and ethnicity are gathered by the census, the effects of which we are still navigating today. Both modifications reflected understandings of race and ethnicity that challenged institutional norms, and the MENA category is an important development that interacts with the precedents set by each census transformation.

Mark All That Apply

For far too long, the census survey asked people to choose only one option on the race question. This came from a history of wrongly associating race with biology and flop science such as craniology that suggested certain races were biologically inferior to others. The idea that the “white race” was superior to others evolved into an obsession with blood quanta, or a manner of tracking people’s bloodlines to measure what percentage was not white. The CB even established new races to correspond to these blood quanta, such as Mulatto, Quadroon, and Octoroon, which were intended for people of mixed black and white parentage or ancestry. Even after these categories were removed from the census, it was both legally and socially the norm to mark one’s race as black “no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood...any mixture of white and nonwhite should be reported according to the nonwhite parent.”⁵⁸ This came to be known as the one-drop rule, and it affected much more than just census categorization. It was a way to determine who was considered white and who was not amidst a changing population, one ruled by laws that desperately tried to maintain systems of racial division and discrimination.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Prewitt, *What Is Your Race?: The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 59.

The hypodescent rule, or the one drop rule, dominated federal statistical data on race until the movement to add an option to fit people who identified with multiple races gained attention. Different multiracial advocacy groups increased their campaign efforts in the 1980s and 1990s, and managed to change the race question on the census so that it allowed people to select multiple race categories. OMB officials knew that the multiracial population in the United States was growing and that the “task of statistically measuring the multiracial phenomenon eventually would have to be confronted.”⁵⁹ It was through the advocacy of multiracial Americans that the Office of Management and Budget realized this change was necessary, though it presented a challenge not only for census data collection, but also other federal statistical data usage. The new format on the census gives instructions to *select one or more* of the given race categories, which is intended to accommodate people who identify with multiple races without compromising the continuity of federal data.⁶⁰ The OMB Directive 15 was modified in 1997 to include these instructions as the standard for all federal data usage, and so began the more widespread use of this language on surveys that collect data on race.

Beyond a change on paper, the multiracial movement signaled a larger change about understandings of race in America. It became clear, at least among a certain population that identified with multiple races and ethnicities, that being told to choose between the five established race categories was no longer adequate. Multiracial Americans did not want to subscribe to the one-drop rule, nor choose one option to make things easier for the CB’s statistical count. The multiracial movement for census change presented a problem for federal

⁵⁹ Reginald G. Daniel, "Black by Popular Demand: Multiracial Identity and the Decennial Census," In *More Than Black: Multiracial Identity & New Racial Order*, 143, (Temple University Press, 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bsz6v.12>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

statistical data because it demanded that federal institutions change their essentialist categorization model to recognize a population that could not be separated out by their race. The movement was not a unanimous call for one change; it was made up of different organizations that pushed for disparate ways to address this issue of recognition. Separate visions to address the issue divided the movement largely in two; some argued for a separate category for multiracial Americans, while others campaigned for the option to select multiple races which is the standard that became incorporated into the census format we have today.⁶¹ Though the movement was not homogenous, the different approaches effectively raised awareness about the same issue, the same lack of recognition, and ultimately actualized change at the the federal level.

The census modification led by multiracial Americans is useful to compare with the development of a MENA identity category because of similar characteristics across both movements for change. Much like the multiracial population, Middle Eastern and North African people are a minority community that has expressed that the federal statistical data standards on race and ethnicity do not reflect who they are. Both groups of people have attempted to convince federal government officials that the issue of recognizing their identities was a matter worth investing in, and worth potential complications for data collection. Indeed, in its 1997 decision to revise data collection, the OMB officials cited “that among other things the mark-one-or-more alternative-unlike the combined format- would require fewer changes in formatting on existing forms, take up less space, and allow for the historical continuity of data.”⁶² This sentiment from the OMB officials is something to notice, because it hints at a larger problem that is evident in

⁶¹ Ibid., 147.

⁶² Ibid., 143.

issues of identity. In addressing the multiracial movement for census change, the OMB is obviously concerned with efficiency, taking up the least amount of space on the questionnaire, and keeping the changes as close to the manner in which data has been collected up until that point.

Officials' determination to maintain continuity of data makes a lot of sense; if the data the census collects varies too greatly, it becomes difficult to track patterns from the demographic information. The OMB's rejection of a separate multiracial category had to do with two general issues: operational feasibility, and social outcome. In other words, the OMB was concerned with how a new category would affect continuity of data as well as how it could potentially further divide the American population by race. If we think back to the last chapter that mentioned some of the organizations and programs that rely on census data, we can imagine the complications that could be caused by changing the racial categories available on the census. It would be a difficult adjustment for statistical data users to account for a sudden loss of people in one racial group and the addition of people in a new category, which is one of the reasons why the standard is to *select all that apply* as opposed to a separate multiracial category.

The concern with continuity of data are directly related to the way our country has become so deeply entrenched in statistical data on race. As Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the CB puts it, "there is tremendous inertia in statistical practice."⁶³ It is ironic to think about the fact that, because of the high value of statistical race data in our country, we have actually made it difficult for ourselves to improve the data. As discussed in the last chapter, so much of the operation of our country relies on census data that changing the survey to improve it presents an

⁶³ Prewitt, "*What is Your Race*," 168.

obstacle. Today I don't think it is the wish of any CB or OMB officials to exclude populations that aren't being recognized, but it is an unfortunate reality that it is part of their job to be concerned with the costs of recognizing a population, not just the benefits.

The costs of changing the census race and ethnic categories are wide-reaching, which explains why the census has maintained a rather similar format over the years. Changes to the information asked must go through an approval process with the Office of Management and Budget; for the OMB to approve of a change to the census, the agency must ensure that standardization across all government agencies can be achieved.⁶⁴ The result is a reluctance to change existing categories. As a regulatory agency, the OMB not only holds the literal power to approve new categories or question formats, but also the power to signal what issues are important enough to address. For example, when the OMB approved the addition of the *select all that apply* direction on the census race question, the White House signaled the importance of what Kenneth Prewitt describes as an “expressive rationale” to census race categories.⁶⁵ According to Prewitt, the “expressive factor” is the ability of the census to give recognition to a population, which is a break from the traditional purposes of the categories that I discussed in the last chapter. Prewitt evidences the movement to allow respondents to “mark one or more” as the introduction of the expressive function of the census race categories, and writes that this movement was one that saw identity expression as the goal rather than racial justice.⁶⁶

I think it's interesting that the two ideas are viewed separately; racial justice is seen as something that does not involve the freedom to express one's race or ethnicity when asked. The

⁶⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 134.

multiracial movement to change the census viewed these objectives as distinct as well, although the effect of their campaign resulted in the merging of these goals. The movement proved that the census could be a platform to recognize minority identity as well as a place to support policy change. Equality in this sense is not only about access to employment and housing and healthcare, but also about the ability to declare your identity freely, uninhibited by fear or the options that statistical norms have provided.

The Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins Question

One of the large concerns that the census race and ethnicity questions present is that of nonresponse, confusion, and/or rejection of the categories. Some of the most obvious evidence we have of this dilemma is shown in the responses of people who identify as Hispanic or Latino on the census, in which millions of people have selected the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origins identifier and either skipped the race question or selected the Some Other Race category to reinforce their Hispanic or Latino identity.

As Martha E. Gimenez notes in her article “U.S. Ethnic Politics: Implications for Latin Americans,” the Hispanic label was created by the OMB in the 70s.⁶⁷ The history behind the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins question is a particularly interesting case to look at for the purposes of understanding how changes to the census questions on race and ethnicity develop. The origins question debuted on the census in 1970, however, Hispanic and Latino identity was first introduced on the census as a “Mexican” race category in 1930 and quickly removed thereafter. Data on Latino ethnicity was later gathered using different identifiers related to

⁶⁷ Martha E. Giménez, "U.S. Ethnic Politics: Implications for Latin Americans," *Latin American Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (1992): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633841>.

Spanish language and surname⁶⁸ until four decades later, when efforts led by Mexican Americans resulted in a new Hispanic self-identifier.

Whereas in 1930 the inclusion of a Mexican category in the census was seen as an effort to stigmatize Mexican Americans, in the post-Civil Rights era the inclusion of a Hispanic-origin question (separate from the race question) was welcomed as a source of data that could be used to protect the rights of Mexican Americans.⁶⁹

Mexican-American leaders were motivated by the achievements of the black civil rights movement, including social programs enacted to help disadvantaged minority communities. Programs and agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity Community Action Program and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission required groups to apply for aid with documentation of need, but when community leaders looked for statistical data about Hispanic and Latino communities, however, they found that the data was incomplete and the Hispanic population was undercounted.⁷⁰ Without better documentation of the Hispanic and Latino population (which was required for social programs), communities would not receive full funding or benefits from social legislation. So, Mexican-Americans pushed for change to the U.S. census, which was received with reluctance by census administrators. Not only did census officials consider the resources required to test and add a new item to be a problem, administrators also found it hard to define the Hispanic population:

Was it to be defined as those persons who had ancestors from Mexico; if so, how many ancestors? Was it those persons who spoke Spanish? Or was it those who called themselves Mexican-American or some other Hispanic name? What if someone had

⁶⁸ Jen'nan Ghazal Read, "Measuring Ethnicity with U.S. Census Data: Implications for Mexicans and Arabs," *Population Research and Policy Review* 32, no. 4 (2013): 615, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42002317>.

⁶⁹ Anthony Daniel Perez and Charles Hirschman, "The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the US Population: Emerging American Identities," *Population and Development Review* 35, no. 1 (2009): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25487641>.

⁷⁰ Harvey M. Choldin, "Statistics and Politics: The "Hispanic Issue" in the 1980 Census," *Demography* 23, no. 3 (1986): 406, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2061438>.

parents from Mexico but did not consider himself or herself to be Hispanic?...While they had no objection to asking a person's country of birth and his or her parents' country of birth, they were reluctant to ask individuals how they identified themselves.⁷¹

These questions illustrate the fluidity of Hispanic and Latino identity and the CB's attempt to address it. The questions also bring up the agency's challenge of creating a clear category for statistical purposes and the idea of self-identification as a way to navigate it. There have been similar difficulties for the CB to define the MENA category, because not everyone from the region or with ancestors from the region speaks the same language or considers themselves to be Arab or of "MENA" descent. Much like the case of the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins category, the CB has the shared task of defining a category which will result in better data about the Middle Eastern and North African community. Testing MENA has lead the CB deeper into the practice of asking people how they identify themselves, a question that is complicated for a survey to ask, but remains necessary for all the reasons outlined in the first chapter.

The Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins question is unique in that it presents a category of origins and not race, and has added both a more accurate marker of identification and a somewhat confusing element for census users and data collectors. While Hispanic or Latino census takers have an ethnic category on the survey to represent them, this factor does not necessarily make it easier for Hispanic and Latino respondents when it comes to race. There exists a problem of confusion and rejection of the race categories, shown by the large percentage of Some Other Race responses to the 2000 census by people of hispanic descent:

As evidenced by their responses to the race question, many Hispanics do not identify themselves with the standard categories of American racial statistics...many Hispanics either leave the race question blank or reiterate their Hispanic identity by writing in Mexican or some other Latin American country on the "Some Other Race" line. In 2000,

⁷¹ Ibid., 406.

nearly half of all Hispanics (48 percent) supplied an SOR response (alone or in combination) to the race question.⁷²

As noted earlier, nonresponse and SOR responses present an issue for census data collection and really shake the branches of the OMB standards. The responses are proof that there is something amiss with the categories, telling information about how certain populations are reacting to the standardized approach to race in the U.S. census. This information may also give us an idea of how a MENA category would be received by people with origins in the region.

Reporting Origins Rather than Race

The Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origins question is particularly useful to look at when considering a MENA category because of the similar ways the categories are constructed. Both MENA and Hispanic/Latino/Spanish are categories within which people may identify with varied cultures and races. According to information from the 2015 Forum on Ethnic Groups from the Middle East and North Africa, participants in the forum seemed more inclined to add MENA identity to the census via a question like the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin question, which says something about the way people of Middle Eastern and North African descent consider their identities. As one possible explanation of this view, researchers Charles Hirschman, Richard Alba, and Reynolds Farley suggest that, rather than the concept of race, “‘Origins’ seems to be closer to the popular understanding of diversity in American society.”⁷³ News about developments for the 2020 census seem to support this theory; the decision to keep a MENA

⁷² Perez and Hirschman, “The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition,” 38.

⁷³ Charles Hirschman, Richard Alba and Reynolds Farley, “The Meaning and Measurement of Race in the U.S. Census: Glimpses into the Future,” *Demography* 37, no. 3 (2000): 391, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2648049>.

category off the 2020 census came alongside a comment about the need for further testing of MENA as an ethnic category rather than a race category. Karen Battle, chief of the population division of the U.S. Census stated on January 26th:

We have put out Federal Register Notices where we've talked about our research plans, and the comments that we have gotten back have showed that there is a large segment of the Middle Eastern and North African population who feel that MENA should be treated as an ethnicity, a formal ethnicity, similar to how we treat Hispanic and Latino.... What we need to do is do more research and testing where we're testing MENA as an ethnicity separate from the race question.⁷⁴

First of all, Battle's comment tells us that a MENA category is not off the table, and that census administrators are taking the Middle Eastern and North African identity concern into careful consideration. That being said, given the histories of the Hispanic/Latino origins question and the option to select multiple races, we know that there can be several factors which dissuade census administrators from updating the census questions on race and ethnicity, including resources necessary to test and carry out changes and concerns about statistical data consistency. The fact that the MENA category has been shelved until a later census, however, comes off as rejection and denial to some people of Middle Eastern and North African descent.

"We're definitely gonna be screwed for the next few years," says Ibrahim, an Iraqi student at a liberal arts college on the North East, "Why is it taking them so long to figure it out?" Grace, another undergraduate student at a college on the North East feels similarly dismissed:

Grace: It's disrespectful. You know what, yeah, like, I want to see it on there. I want to see Middle Easterners acknowledged. That also includes Turks and Iranians too, like it's not just the Arab world... Amazighs, Berbers, other groups too in North Africa, Kurds... We need to be acknowledged. We have a place just like other groups. Why can't... it's disrespectful. It's a form of erasure. "Other" doesn't cut it.

⁷⁴ "2020 Census Quarterly Program Management Review (PMR)," Video file, 24:38, Youtube, accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4He025kOzJo&feature=youtu.be&t=24m49s>.

Abdu, a middle-aged father living in California, takes the news a step further and suggests that the absence of a separate identifier for people of Middle Eastern or North African descent has been a deliberate choice on the part of the government, a choice to silence what could be a stronger political voice in the U.S. if given formal recognition. Abdu had more of a heightened sense of skepticism than the other participants I spoke to, and his attention to how the government views people of Middle Eastern and North African descent is important for reasons which we will discuss further in the next chapter.

Not everyone I spoke to felt dismissed by the news, however. Hafez, a professor at a liberal arts school, expresses more indifference about the decision than indignation. He asked me how the CB would be further testing the category, and if this was the procedural norm for the introduction of new categories. I replied that, based on my knowledge of the addition of the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origins category and the option to select multiple races, the MENA category seems to have followed a similar developmental pathway. “If this is how categories for the census are identified, then okay,” he responded, “as in it’s a matter of practice, there’s no perfect way of doing it, this sounds to me as good as any other way of doing it.”

Hafez seems to have a more blasé attitude about the CB announcement than the rest of the individuals I spoke to, who view the decision as a form of denial. While he does not feel personally cast aside by the announcement that 2020 will not be the year a separate MENA category is added to the census, he acknowledged that the ability to identify oneself as part of a greater community has important political ramifications, ramifications that may take precedence over whether or not a person feels that MENA represents them. His acceptance of the CB

procedures as “a matter of practice” does not diminish his belief that reporting identity is a political act:

Hafez: If you say ‘tell me one thing about yourself’, I will need to pick one thing, and relegate the others to a secondary status... elevating [one] part of my personal history, the part that is potentially persecute-able... seems like the more politically responsible thing to do.

Hafez points out that identifying with a vulnerable group, even on something such as a census survey, is a political action that helps to strengthen the voice of that particular group. The more people that identify with that group, even though it may not come to mind initially, the more political power the group has in a state that apportions power and resources by population. This idea speaks to the power dynamic that exists between minority communities and the bureaucracy behind generating census categories.

Change From the Ground Up

The *select all that apply* language on the census and the Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origins question are two developments with histories that describe a power shift with regards to establishing standards for collecting data on race and ethnicity. The Hispanic/Latino origins category, for example, was created as a result of an exchange relationship between census administrators and Mexican-American community leaders,⁷⁵ which ultimately helped the CB conduct a better census. According to sociologist Harvey M. Choldin, “Ethnic and political mobilization was directly responsible for the addition of a separate census question on Hispanic identity, beginning in the 1970 census, and for the separate listing of numerous Asian nationality

⁷⁵ Choldin, "Statistics and Politics," 413.

groups under the race question.”⁷⁶ We can also see a similar form of mobilization from the multiracial population in the movement to add the option to select one or more races on the census and the ongoing development of the MENA category, which informs us of the ways new categories and options for racial and ethnic identification can be introduced to the census. These developments show that there is space for minority groups to initiate major changes to data collection standards, and that if expressing identity matters to a group, they will make themselves heard and demand change even if census administrators or other government officials are reluctant to accept it. The multiracial population and the Hispanic/Latino population are two examples of minority communities that organized to produce change from the ground up, as opposed to change that is dictated from the top. I use the words “ground” and “top” not to ascribe any ideas of inferiority or superiority, but rather to illustrate a power dynamic that exists between minority communities and government officials such as census administrators when it comes to the issue of reporting identity. The White House, the CB, and the OMB all have more designated power when it comes to the census, but recent developments have proved that minority communities can and will challenge this power, and organize to create change when it is needed. Census administrators must then respond carefully if they truly wish to collect the best data.

⁷⁶ Hirschman, Alba and Farley, “The Meaning and Measurement of Race,” 383.

Chapter 3: Fear and the Census

For the Middle Eastern and North African population, some people find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to declaring their race and/or ethnicity. As Kenneth Prewitt, former director of The CB, writes in *What is Your Race?: The Census and our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans*, "It is not that what is uncounted is unavailable as a policy target. Congress immediately passed the Patriot Act after 9/11 without knowing how many trained terrorists there were in the country." While Pruitt aims to make the case that policy can still be achieved without specific quantitative data to support it, his example using the Patriot Act brings to light a concern for many Middle Eastern and North African people in the United States, as well as others who are concerned about their privacy. Hafez, for example, expresses his reservations about being counted with a separate MENA identifier:

Hafez: Because the surveillance and policing power of the state and of corporations, of just the amount of information that is produced and stored and so on, is incredible, way beyond the processing power of government, then it worries me that increased visibility... in a context of heightened racial tensions, racism... in a moment in which democratic mechanisms would bring openly racist political currents to the forefront scares me, because...it makes the job of people who would want to besiege, eradicate, expel, disenfranchise, etcetera, certain groups... you've already made their job easier because you've already identified who these people are for them.

Hafez gives one explanation for why people are concerned with providing information on their race and ethnicity, which is relatable for many people, not just people of Middle Eastern or North African descent. He brings up the issue of surveillance and the policing of populations within the context of racial tension as a concern for the data collection of race and ethnicity, suggesting that it would be easier to discriminate against populations by collecting this data. The American-Arab

Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) takes this concern one step further, and questions the agency's *ability* to keep data confidential and protect it from being used unethically.

Now, some may think that is far-fetched. After all, the CB is committed to privacy protection and even states on its website that it promises to protect the confidentiality of the information respondents provide.⁷⁷ It is also important to note that the Patriot Act, a counter-terrorism measure passed after 9/11 to increase the investigation and surveillance powers of the state,⁷⁸ does not allow census data to be searched. In fact, in 2010, the CB issued a statement that clarified this position, stating that “the Justice Department determined that no provision of the U.S. Patriot Act overrides the provisions of Title 13 that protects the confidentiality of CB data.”⁷⁹ To further explain how the CB protects information, there are multiple pages on the CB website that describe four different policies and safeguards the agency has in place to achieve confidentiality, which include federal law, privacy principles, statistical safeguards, and data stewardship.⁸⁰ These policies and protections are extremely comprehensive, yet historical examples and even a recent revision to federal law raise concerns for Americans about the confidentiality of their information. What this CB activity reveals is that the skepticism towards statistical data collection on race and ethnicity, that Americans such as Ahmed worry about, is widespread and reasonable. In fact, a 2002 report issued by CB staff compiled a host of studies that evaluated public trust in the agency. The report, “Privacy and Confidentiality Research and the U.S. Census Bureau: Recommendations Based on a Review of the Literature”

⁷⁷ US Census Bureau, "Data Protection and Privacy," Data Protection, accessed Mar 2, 2018, https://www.census.gov/about/policies/privacy/data_protection.html.

⁷⁸ Department of Justice, "The USA PATRIOT Act: Preserving Life and Liberty," Highlights of the USA Patriot Act, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/highlights.htm>.

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, "A Message From the Census Bureau Director," (July 2012), accessed February 8, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/bc-1428rv.pdf>.

⁸⁰ US Census Bureau, "Data Protection and Privacy."

by found that “concerns about privacy and confidentiality have remained an issue for some people in the general population, hard-to-enumerate populations, and even in the Census Bureau staff.”⁸¹ While issues of confidentiality and privacy have existed since census beginnings, public attitudes are increasingly complex because of advances in technology in recent decades.

As time has progressed additional factors such as the use of administrative records, that advent of new data dissemination media (e.g., American FactFinder), and advances in technology (e.g., computers and data linking capabilities) have been added to the privacy/confidentiality equation, and it is likely that new factors will continue to be added in the future.

There are multiple historical cases where census data were used in ways that resulted in problematic policy, but I’ll focus on two that illustrate the shocking potential of census data misuse when combined with a dangerous political climate.

Data Misuse and Confidentiality Concerns

The first is a case from the 1840 census and an environment dominated by racist science which claimed that racial inferiority existed and was something that was biological. In this example, the U.S. congress asked that the CB measure “the insane and idiots” by race, which the CB implemented on the census form.⁸² The 1840 census data resulted in an absurd rate of insanity and idiocy among the free black population in the north when compared to the enslaved black population in the south; the ratio of “insane” blacks to the total black population in the North was 1 in 162.4, whereas the the ratio in the South was 1 in 1,558.⁸³ The data were

⁸¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census Statistical Research Division, *Privacy and Confidentiality Research and the U.S. Census Bureau: Recommendations Based on a Review of the Literature*, by Thomas S. Mayer, (February 7, 2002): 16, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/rsm2002-01.pdf>.

⁸² Prewitt, *What is Your Race*, 49.

⁸³ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013),133, s.v. "Decennial Censuses: 1850 Census," by J. David Hacker.

definitely flawed,⁸⁴ yet following this report, “the census results were immediately trumpeted by pro-slavery forces in Congress, bolstered by the southern press reporting that the census had presented a basic truth about the catastrophe awaiting the country if slavery were abolished.”⁸⁵

The 1840 case shows how census race data was misused to present dangerous and inaccurate evidence in support of slavery in the United States. Lawmakers and media who shared pro-slavery ideology capitalized on the statistical information and used it to fan their flames of racist policy. This example highlights how political ideologies and statistical data can come together to form arguments that “discredit or stigmatize victim populations,”⁸⁶ even when data are misconstrued or blatantly wrong.

The second historical example occurred during World War II and actually helped shape the census privacy policy that we have today: Title 13 of the U.S. Code. In this case, the political climate of war allowed census information to be shared with war agencies, which meant that the confidentiality of census data was not protected. Race categories were was a major factor in this data release: according to research in the early 2000s carried out by Margo Anderson and William Seltzer, “the bureau had provided tabulations to the War Department to assist in the internment of Japanese Americans and also complied with a request by the Treasury secretary for names and locations of people of Japanese ancestry residing in the Washington, D.C. area.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 133, s.v. “Decennial Censuses: 1840 Census,” by Patricia Cline Cohen.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Prewitt, *What is Your Race*, 50.

⁸⁶ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 272, s.v. “Human Rights and Population Censuses,” by William Seltzer.

⁸⁷ *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey*, by Margo J. Anderson, Constance F. Citro, and Joseph J. Salvo, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 93, s.v. “Confidentiality,” by Gerald W. Gates.

The CB's compliance with the Second War Powers Act helped the federal government commit human rights abuses against Japanese Americans, and it is only within the last twenty or so years that this information has been uncovered and more widely discussed.⁸⁸ It's worth noting that the 1940 census asked for "race or color," and the Japanese nationality was considered its own race category.⁸⁹ The Second War Powers Act made this sharing of confidential census data legal at the time, and the law has long since expired; however, the case is important in highlighting how the CB not only fell through on its commitment to protect the information of American citizens, but put people in danger by releasing what was supposed to be confidential information.

While contributing to the internment of Japanese Americans during the second World War is shocking and disturbing enough, there also exists the shocking silence surrounding the CB's involvement in this case of human rights abuse. Research done in 2000 by authors Seltzer and Anderson examined the possibilities that the CB violated its confidentiality clause, deliberately covered up its involvement in the internment of Japanese Americans, and dealt differently with those who reported "Japanese" as their race on the 1940 census. Though their work did not make conclusive claims, "they provided enough evidence to, at the very least, warrant the correction of Census Bureau documents that stated that the Census Bureau actually took extraordinary measures to protect the confidentiality of Japanese Americans."⁹⁰ The research was enough to make a former CB Director, Kenneth Prewitt, admit that the agency

⁸⁸ William Seltzer and Margo Anderson, "The Dark Side of Numbers: The Role of Population Data Systems in Human Rights Abuses," *Social Research* 68, no. 2 (2001): 481-513, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971467>.

⁸⁹ Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, "1940 Census Population Questionnaire," table, 1940, accessed April 29, 2018, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/decennial/technical-documentation/questionnaires/1940_population_questionnaire.pdf.

⁹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Privacy and Confidentiality Research*, 24.

made mistakes and would correct any CB documents that “would lead the reader to believe that the Census Bureau behaved in a manner as to have actually protected the civil rights of Japanese Americans.”⁹¹ On one hand, it makes perfect sense that the agency didn’t publicize its involvement in order to maintain public trust in their important work, yet in doing so, the CB has demonstrated that it is capable of participating in data misuse and keeping it out of the public eye.

A more recent census development invoked the subject of transparency in 2016, when the CB published a revision to its confidentiality pledge in response to the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015. The Act requires the Secretary of Homeland Security to provide security software called Einstein 3A to all federal agencies’ technology systems, including the CB, to protect their internet traffic from malware.⁹² Einstein 3A searches the federal agencies’ internet traffic for malware, and when malware is found, “Department of Homeland Security (DHS) personnel shunt the Internet packets that contain the malware signature aside for further inspection.”⁹³ According to the Federal Register Notice, the inspection process means the CB is not able to hold the same confidentiality pledge:

Since it is possible that such packets entering or leaving a statistical agency’s information technology system may contain a small portion of confidential statistical data, statistical agencies can no longer promise their respondents that their responses will be seen only by statistical agency personnel or their sworn agents.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., 24.

⁹² U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, *60 Day Federal Register Notice*, by Sheleen Dumas, report no. 243, 94322, December 23, 2016, accessed April 30, 2018, https://www2.census.gov/about/policies/privacy/60_day_FRN_2016_30959_published_12_23_16.pdf.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

While the system Einstein 3A was implemented to further protect our federal agencies from malware, it is important to consider how it has forced the CB to revise its confidentiality pledge. In an effort to protect national security, the new technology actually exposes the fragility of the CB's privacy protections. The Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015 asks that federal agencies comply with a new system of security, one that changes the status quo of maintaining confidential information. The Second War Powers Act comes to mind, and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights all took note. In a response to the Federal Notice about the confidentiality pledge revision, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee brings up the past as a way to relate concern for the Arab American community today:

During World War II, the Census Bureau shared information on the personal information including the residence of Japanese Americans and Japanese residents in the United States with government agencies. The use of Census data during World War II was the catalyst for the FR Doc No: 2016-30959 3 inclusion of Title 13 privacy protections. This further demonstrates how important the confidentiality pledge is and why we must maintain it, in light of the political atmosphere and federal policy actions including but not limited to the Executive Order that effectively target Arab, Muslim, and immigrant communities.⁹⁵

The CB issued a response in consideration of the public comments made by the ADC and the other organizations, stating among other reassurances that "E3A does not provide DHS with access to a respondent's personal information."⁹⁶ The fact that the privacy policy must be revised, however, makes some people feel uneasy.

⁹⁵ The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee to Department of Commerce, "Comments to the U.S. Department of Commerce on the Revision of the Confidentiality Pledge Under Title 13 United States Code, Section 9," (n.d.), accessed April 29, 2018,

https://www2.census.gov/about/policies/privacy/FR_Doc_No_2016_30959_public_comment.pdf.pg 2

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, *Revised Confidentiality Pledge 30 Day Federal Register Notice*, by Sheleen Dumas, report no. 129, 31554, (July 7, 2017), accessed April 30, 2018, https://www2.census.gov/about/policies/privacy/Revised_confidentiality_pledge_30_day_FRN_7_7_17_2017_14110.pdf.

We can see why individuals like Ahmed may feel particularly concerned that documentation of their ethnicity will be housed in statistical databases with their name, home address, other personal information connected to it. The example brought up by Kenneth Prewitt is particularly relevant to think about here; the Patriot Act and the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act are examples of policy that makes people feel as though the government has unrestricted access to our information, even though it is legally untrue. Both of the historical cases illustrate very real misuse of Census data, which prove that the CB does not have a nonzero risk record with regards to data collection on race. The two historical examples described earlier are two of many that may add to people's distrust of the CB, though they are historical and hopefully moments of our history that our policymakers have learned from and will not repeat.

Public Worry

The fear of being counted as Middle Eastern or North African comes from both knowledge about history of the census (or lack thereof) and personal experiences; many people of Middle Eastern and North African descent have experienced racial profiling, discrimination, or micro-aggressions in their lives. The unsettling social interactions that people have experienced have informed their wariness to declare their Middle Eastern or North African identities, and census history shows that the fear does not exist in a vacuum. The information people receive from personal experiences in addition to the historical examples of census misuse have contributed to the worry that identifying as MENA may link individuals to a pool of people that will be unreasonably targeted.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Chow, "For Some Americans Of MENA Descent."

The CB has taken note of recent public worry, and in 2002, CB staff compiled a host of studies that evaluated public trust in the agency. The report, “Privacy and Confidentiality Research and the U.S. Census Bureau: Recommendations Based on a Review of the Literature” found that “concerns about privacy and confidentiality have remained an issue for some people in the general population, hard-to-enumerate populations, and even in the Census Bureau staff.”⁹⁸ While issues of confidentiality and privacy have existed since census beginnings, the report finds that public attitudes are increasingly complex because of advances in technology in recent decades.

As time has progressed additional factors such as the use of administrative records, that advent of new data dissemination media (e.g., American FactFinder), and advances in technology (e.g., computers and data linking capabilities) have been added to the privacy/confidentiality equation, and it is likely that new factors will continue to be added in the future.⁹⁹

According to other expert knowledge, however, Americans shouldn’t be so concerned because the 1940 case of unethical data dissemination by the CB is the only case of its kind in the history of the agency. Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the CB, and Maya Berry, executive director of the Arab American Institute, have both made similarly resigned statements about privacy and governmental powers to track respondents.

Maya Berry has a rather cynical outlook concerning the powers of the government to violate privacy; in an NPR news article written last year about the MENA category and the census, Berry “concludes that if the government wants to monitor Muslims, or Americans of Middle Eastern or North African descent, which it has done in the past, it will find a way.”¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Privacy and Confidentiality Research*, 16.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Chow, “For Some Americans of MENA Descent.”

past incident she refers to is the New York Police Department's Demographics Unit which spied on American muslims after the attacks on 9/11.¹⁰¹ The operations were intended to serve as a warning system for terrorism, but the program went on for approximately 11 years before it was finally disbanded with no leads.¹⁰² Berry's outlook on the issue, much like Kenneth Prewitt's, is not meant to scare people, but rather illustrate the issue of balance between common good and privacy. Berry stresses the common good in that balance in a statement on behalf of the Arab American Institute:

For the Arab American community, and many other stakeholders, the decision to cut the "Middle Eastern or North African" category from the 2020 Census is a severe blow. Years of undercounting have deprived our community of access to basic services and rights, from language assistance at polling places, to the allocation of educational grants for cultural competency training and language assistance, to greater access to health information and research. A fair and accurate count from census surveys is one of the most important tools for ensuring the civil rights of all Americans. Politics has no role to play in an accurate count.¹⁰³

With regards to a separate MENA category, Berry is much more concerned with the benefits that will come from addressing census undercount than she is with privacy. Prewitt and Berry acknowledge the real privacy concerns that people have, however, they believe that should the government wish to violate that privacy, it will be achieved with or without census involvement. As a response to the issue of privacy and the MENA category, both experts point out that it is not

¹⁰¹ Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, "NYPD: Muslim Spying Led to No Leads, Terror Cases," Associated Press, August 21, 2012, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.ap.org/ap-in-the-news/2012/nypd-muslim-spying-led-to-no-leads-terror-cases>.

¹⁰² Matt Apuzzo and Joseph Goldstein, "New York Drops Unit That Spied on Muslims," New York Times, April 15, 2014, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/nyregion/police-unit-that-spied-on-muslims-is-disbanded.html>.

¹⁰³ Maya Berry, "Statement: AAI Responds to Inclusion of an Untested Citizenship Question on the Decennial Census," *Arab American Institute Blog*, entry posted March 27, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018, http://www.aaiusa.org/aai_responds_to_inclusion_of_an_untested_citizenship_question_on_the_decennial_census.

reporting your identity that is the issue, but rather the Trump administration's designs for demographic data. In an interview on March 11th, 2018, Kenneth Prewitt spoke at length about various privacy issues:

Me: People have been expressing concern about privacy and about confidentiality, like trusting the census...

Kenneth Prewitt: Well that's not unreasonable. It's slightly unreasonable in the following sense: The decennial census itself, the actual thing that goes out every ten years, there's very little there that people are hiding. They're not hiding their age, they're not hiding their gender, they're not hiding whether they rent or own, and most of them are not hiding anything about their race and that's why they want to be on the form... The Census Bureau takes enormously seriously the privacy question, and there's simply a tradeoff between privacy and accuracy in any big data set. If you really want zero privacy risk, the only way is to make the data so abstract and generalizable that it's not gonna be geographically and demographically granular... I can tell you the Census Bureau right now has a major group working on what is the tradeoff on the 2020 census. And they're tilting to favor privacy... that means a lot of those low, small area data will not be accurate, because if you make it accurate to the block level, that's when someone's identity could be discovered.

Me: And how could someone's identity be discovered?

Kenneth Prewitt: The hackers are reeeaaally sophisticated now. I'm not a technical expert on how this happens, but going into big data sets and finding individuals is not that difficult, uh, if you have birthdate, if you have location, you can go find that person... if there's only one African American age 50 living on a block, and you can get those block data, you can find there's only one and then you find out who that person is by cross checking it with other kinds of data... There's a lot of firms already doing that, of course, so it's ironic that in some respects our privacy is much more at risk if we're on the social media, than it is from the questions the census asks us. But that doesn't mean that the census will not take it very very seriously.

Me: Hmm. But on the part of the Census, as in like the census misusing data or leaking information, or...

Kenneth: Well yeah but the data is not very... what would they leak? The only thing that, the only major violation of-and it was a technical violation, not a legal violation- was in 1940, when the census did not release anybody's identity, they simply said: on these blocks there are very large number of Japanese Americans, on these blocks there are only some, but not a whole lot of them, on these blocks there are almost none. If you're in a hurry to round up the Japanese Americans to put them in detention camps, then you go to the blocks where they live. Now, the Census Bureau never released the identity of any

individual person, but they were complicit in helping the roundup of the Japanese Americans. But that could be true for the MENA, if they're clustered in Dearborn and the Census Bureau says that's where they're clustered, and then somebody has reason to...of course of we know the undocumented are highly clustered in their housing patterns, and if someone where to uh, go find them, and ICE wants to round them up, they can use census data to try to do that. So we will try to not make those data available, um, at that level of detail, so that they can't go round them up. But that means there will be deliberate errors in that data at low levels, small geographic areas.

Me: It was the Second War Powers Act, right, that allowed the Census to share that information, or asked them to? Do you think there's any chance that something like that could happen again in a time of crisis? Like I mean, we're "at war with terrorism" right now, I'm wondering...

Kenneth: I'm past the [chuckling] point where I can say something cannot happen because it just won't, it's not the kind of society we live in. If there were a major terrorist attack and the Trump administration wanted to go round up every Middle Easterner, every student that's here from any given place, um uh, from Syria or Iraq or what have you, they could do it. They could get a, this is not a Supreme Court that would stop this, this is not a Congress that would stop that. Umm, that's how, yeah, I'm not saying they want to, or intend to, or they will, I'm only saying that I do not see the barriers right now that would prevent that from happening. I actually, I'm afraid of, that's my big point, that... I actually do not know what's going to happen in 2020 about the census.... You know at the last minute the Trump administration could simply say, "I want a race question that only has three categories: citizen, noncitizen, and are you white or nonwhite."

Me: Seriously?

Kenneth: Yes.

What strikes me the most about this conversation are the ways in which Kenneth Prewitt understands the gravity of community privacy concerns, particularly for ethnic and racial minorities, however he downplays the role of the CB in these issues and instead highlights the threats of hackers and the Trump administration. When it comes to privacy, he is not concerned about the CB so much as he is about the presidential administration and how they intend to make use of census data.

Shortly following this interview, on March 26th, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that there will be a question on the 2020 decennial census that asks for citizenship status,¹⁰⁴ which the Trump administration defended.¹⁰⁵ The citizenship question was requested by the Department of Justice (DOJ) on the grounds of providing better block data of voting age individuals to improve enforcement of the Voting Rights Act,¹⁰⁶ but many concerned Americans and community leaders like Maya Berry are worried about the effect the question might have on census response rate. California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, for example, brought the issue to court the same day the citizenship question was announced; the lawsuit challenges the question due to the potential increase in non-response that would undercount the undocumented American population.¹⁰⁷ As discussed in the first chapter, census undercount has major implications in the enumeration of the population for seats in the House of Representatives, allocation of federal funding and more. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, however, does not believe that fear will play a substantial part in the collection of accurate data. In a memo released about the citizenship question, Secretary Ross writes: "I find that the need for accurate citizenship data and the limited burden that the reinstatement of the citizenship question would impose outweigh fears about a potentially lower response rate." His statement is contradictory in

¹⁰⁴ Office of Public Affairs, "U.S. Department of Commerce Announces Reinstatement of Citizenship Question to the 2020 Decennial Census," news release, March 26, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2018/03/us-department-commerce-announces-reinstatement-citizenship-question-2020>.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Kamisar, "White House Defends Citizenship Question on Census," *The Hill*, March 27, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/380500-white-house-defends-citizenship-question-on-census>.

¹⁰⁶ Wilbur Ross to Karen Dunn Kelley, memorandum, "Reinstatement of a Citizenship Question on the 2020 Decennial Census Questionnaire," March 26, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018, https://www.commerce.gov/sites/commerce.gov/files/2018-03-26_2.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ *State of California v. Secretary Wilbur L. Ross*, No. 3:18-cv-01865, (United States District Court For The Northern District of California). Accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4423334-California-Complaint-Census.html>.

that he recognizes the importance of “accurate citizenship data,” yet believes that the data won’t be affected by census nonresponse. Community leaders such as Hector Sanchez Barba, Chair of NHLA and Executive Director of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, believe the citizenship question was brought to the table by politics, not public need as the DOJ and Secretary Ross declare. In a press release produced by the National Hispanic Leadership agenda, Sanchez Barba says: “The Trump administration’s addition of a citizenship question is pure politics. Their aim is to drive down the number of Latinos participating in the census, so that our communities are deprived of the political representation and federal resources we deserve.”¹⁰⁸

Given the concern with census nonresponse, some may argue that the citizenship question creates a similar problem to the MENA category, and that pushing for more specific data about the MENA population but not citizen status is hypocritical. There is an important difference between the two, however, which is that the development of the MENA category is being led by the community it seeks to represent.

As we have discussed with the MENA population in the United States, fear plays a major role in the act of reporting identity, and it is difficult to separate that fear from current politics and events. Scholars of statistical data agree: in response to the decision to keep a MENA category off the 2020 census, Kenneth Prewitt said, “if the question hadn’t been killed, I would imagine that fewer of the Middle Easterners would have been comfortable with it, with Trump in the office.” The opinions of some Middle Eastern and North African people can confirm this

¹⁰⁸ National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, "NHLA Condemns Hasty Addition Of Citizenship Question To 2020 Census," news release, March 27, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://nationalhispanicleadership.org/nhla-media/press-releases/17-press/494-march-27-2018-nhla-condemns-hasty-addition-of-citizenship-question-to-2020-census>.

view, like those of Ibrahim, who seems to be continuously weighing the risks and, at the time of the interview at least, found that the benefits for his community overcame his fears.

Ibrahim: I mean at this time, like, especially cause they banned most of the MENA countries from entering the U.S., I feel like it's even gonna be dangerous in that sense for us to be in the... like it's dangerous for us to be separated in one category because people are going to single us out as like "a bad minority". This is something I would be anxious about, but at the same time there is enough good people that might help us. Even though I see it as a risky thing to be in that category, I would take it. I think for the longer term, it's gonna only get better.

Ibrahim's places his fears in a time-relative way, speaking about travel-ban policy under the Trump administration as an example of current politics that he considers in the act of reporting identity. What brings him to the table is the hope that the treatment of Middle Eastern and North African people in the U.S. will get better, and that his census response will play a role in that progress. From Ibrahim's point of view, a crucial distinction can be made between the MENA category and the citizenship question, primarily that the Middle Eastern and North African population sees the adoption of the census change as beneficial and necessary. The citizenship question, on the other hand, was certainly not developed by communities of undocumented Americans, but instead was established at the "top", following the hierarchical power dynamic between minority populations and the government.

Conclusion: Beyond the Census

I wish to set the record straight and say that my intention with this analysis is not to imply that census information will be deliberately misused in any particular way. Instead, I aim to explain the ways that the U.S. census is an integral function of the state with wide-ranging consequences for government, business, research, and the discussion of identity. Given this range of social and political implications, we need to consider census question changes carefully, especially when they affect vulnerable populations.

The benefits of enumerating a hidden group in federal statistical data include better apportionment of political power, economic resources and more, yet for minority communities, the task of reporting identity can be complicated and risky. Serious problems can and have occurred from data misuse, which is why the issue of changing the census race and ethnic categories cannot be taken lightly. The categories that appear on the census need to reflect the perceived risks that individuals may worry about if they were to identify with that group, such as the fear that identifying as Middle Eastern or North African could put people at greater risk of ethnic profiling. This fear can manifest in distrust of the government, as it did in the case of the NYPD's Demographics Unit, to say nothing of what might occur if the census is to include a citizenship question as the Trump administration has ordered.¹⁰⁹

In addition to balancing risks and benefits, census administrators and other government officials involved in establishing federal statistical data standards need to work with the communities that will be affected when considering census modification, a crucial measure that

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

the proposed citizenship question lacks. The MENA category is an unfolding example of the trade off between the advantages and risks of statistical enumeration, and of promising collaborative efforts between a community seeking change and the government officials that have the designated power to authorize it. It's important to raise public awareness about the history and development of census race and ethnic categories so that construction of categories can be more of a conversation between institutions and individuals. If it does not fit the population it describes, an identity should not be fixed through a system that relies on historical continuity, as is the case with the "white" label for people of Middle Eastern and North African descent. Racial and ethnic identities shift with time, as do the ways individuals and communities understand them. Constructing language to reflect those shifts is a task that occurs through conversation, so it's important to make the census accessible to the people it serves. When it comes to reporting racial and ethnic identity: if the shoe doesn't fit, you shouldn't have to wear it, but you shouldn't have to go barefoot as a consequence.

This study points to the ways that the standardized categories for data on race and ethnicity impact the way identity is understood and discussed in the United States. A professor of mine insisted that my research *assumes* the census has an effect of shaping identity, but she, however, is not convinced that it does. She acknowledges the obvious effects that the census has on policy and research, but, as the census is only conducted every 10 years, she challenges whether the census had an effect on identity and counters that the relationship is reversed, that it is identity that affects the census.

My professor's line of thought probably mirrors that of many users and researchers of data on race, and I agree with her in part. I do believe that identity shapes the census, and the

movement to add the option to select multiple races, the Hispanic/Latino origins category, and a MENA category are great examples of this relationship. However, there is evidence that the census race and ethnicity categories work the other way around and influence identity. It is not as if all people who subscribe to a given category identified with that category before it was presented. Consider how the Hispanic category was effectively produced for the census and statistical data purposes, and how Bozorgmehr et al found that the category “MENA” is not a commonly accepted way for Americans from the Middle East and North Africa to identify their ethnic affiliation. The MENA category then presents a group label that people can adopt as a response to others’ perceptions of them and the political impacts of the census, rather than a label that necessarily stems from personal identity as my professor would suggest. My interview with Ahmed was a prime example of this; he hadn’t heard of the movement to add MENA to the census, but upon learning about it, decided to go with the flow of what other Middle Eastern and North Africans found would be beneficial. “I would go with the experiments,” he said, “depending on if [Middle Eastern and North African] people prefer them or not.”

The rest of the interviews helped me to see that the influence of the census on identity begins when the limited options provided on a given form elicit a distorted response due to a kind of process of elimination. Rather than reporting an identity that fits them, the current census format puts respondents of Middle Eastern and North African descent in the position of selecting the *least wrong* option. I think it is difficult for someone to understand this if the standardized categories feel right to them, because they don’t know what it’s like to look at a multiple choice form that asks who they are but has no option to describe them. The act of trying to pick the best or truest option among choices that don’t describe you is an experience that, when repeated over

and over, can be internalized. Frustration with not being recognized by your government, by your school, by your doctor, by whoever is asking you to report your identity can certainly impact the way you think about yourself in relation to others. It is especially frustrating when the form states that Middle Eastern or North African people are white, but society does not see it that way. When I asked Layla, for instance, if she had ever experienced any uncomfortable encounters or insults related to her racial or ethnic identity, and she responded:

Layla: I think I've received more unintentional comments. Especially referring to ISIS. Like I've had someone who I thought was my friend say "Oh, did you see what your people did?" As if ISIS represents me. And I don't think she...she's just so caught up in the media that she can't even separate the two.

Layla's story is evidence that there is something very wrong with classifying all people from the Middle East and North Africa as "white". On paper, she is white, but social experiences have taught her otherwise. Her story also supports the idea of MENA as a panethnicity, because it springs from the external perception that she and ISIS were somehow affiliated as a "people." This is an example of racialization, one of the central criteria in Espiritu's theory on creation of panethnicity. The development of a MENA category also supports panethnic identification through the way it collects heterogeneous groups under a common label, though they may not share the same culture, in order to carve out a political space in a state that recognizes the power of numbers.

Adding MENA to the census could change the way Middle Eastern and North African people are perceived in America, because the appearance of race or ethnic categories on the census reaffirms the categories people already subscribe to and informs the way we feel about the categories. I think about the way that there is a kind of solidarity or shared experience among people who identify with multiple races and ethnicities, and the option to *select all that apply*

recognizes this experience. Allowing people to self identify with multiple races is a measure that normalizes mixed-race identity and demonstrates that people don't have to pick one race or ethnicity to declare if that is not how they identify. If the census, a federally sanctioned survey, still did not allow people to mark all of the races or ethnicities that correspond to them, it would be harder to celebrate or be confident in multiple identities. I think the same goes for MENA; if a new category were to appear on the census, people of Middle Eastern or North African descent might be given the recognition they need so that they and the rest of the U.S. can more fully normalize rather than other Middle Eastern and North African identity. That being said, statistical recognition can be seen a risk as well as a benefit. What census history and contemporary privacy debate tells us is that ethnic minority populations in the U.S. are skeptical of the uses of census data, and concerned with the ways that reporting identity may even put them in danger. Though the MENA category is not destined for 2020, it opens up the discussion about what could happen to census data on race and ethnicity in a time of crisis, or as Kenneth Prewitt warns, at the impulse of a given presidential administration.

Like I mentioned above, I've never actually filled out the real census before; my mother filled it out for our household in 2010 when I was thirteen. The point I'm getting at here is the fact that, without even filling out the actual census, I have interacted with the census race categories all of my life. Forms and surveys that ask for information on race and ethnicity are everywhere, entwined in the processes of government, the private sector, and daily life. Given how statistical data on race and ethnicity has come to be so socially, politically, and economically ingrained in the U.S., it is essential that we pay attention when communities have identified an undercount problem. The MENA category is not only a case of correcting outdated

racial classification, but also a reflection of social and political issues in our country today, including those of privacy, discrimination, and freedom of expression. Adding [] MENA to the census becomes a powerful act in America, where the language used and options available to report identity are normalized and play a part in the continuous construction of categories.

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