

2016

Beyond the margins: invisibility and violence against Middle Eastern and North African American students in the orientalist, post-9/11 world

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Beyond the Margins: Invisibility and Violence Against Middle Eastern and North African
American Students in the Orientalist, Post-9/11 World

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Suggested citation:

Abbady, R.H. (2016). *Beyond the Margins: Invisibility and Violence Against Middle Eastern and North African American Students in the Orientalist, Post-9/11 World* (Bachelor's thesis). Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York.

ABSTRACT

College and university students of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent in the United States represent an understudied, underrepresented, and underacknowledged racial group. Given the racial profiling of MENA people worldwide after 9/11, I studied how U.S. college students of MENA descent experienced social spaces in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Under a critical race framework, I conducted a survey that yielded responses from 12 MENA women at seven PWIs in the northeastern U.S. One key theme that emerged was the role of Orientalism as a form of cultural violence in the daily experiences of the respondents. Additionally, the construction of MENA people as terrorists and MENA women as oppressed subjects was a common experience for the respondents. A second key theme that emerged was the intersection of MENA racial identity and Muslim religious identity, and the conflation of the two even for non-Muslim MENA people. Using a grounded theory approach, I theorized racial-religious oppression as a new framework for understanding the experiences of ethnoreligious groups. Building on this, I theorized racial Islamophobia as a tool of oppression used against MENA people and others perceived to be Muslim. Based on the respondents' experiences of exclusion at their colleges, I conclude by offering directives for the inclusion of college students of MENA descent in the U.S. moving forward.

Keywords: anti-Middle Eastern and North African racism, Middle Eastern and North African racial identity, Islamophobia, predominantly White institutions

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without so many people. First and foremost, I cannot thank my advisor, Colette Cann, enough for all of the encouragement, support, and guidance every step of the way. Colette believed in me and constantly challenged me in ways that, without which, this paper would not have been even half as good. I would also like to thank my second reader, Mootacem Mhiri, for his commentary and feedback, and also for being the first and only Arab teacher I have ever had, and thus serving as an incredible role model like no other I've had before.

I would like to thank my friends in Vassar's Middle Eastern Student Collective, who have been my emotional support system in these intensely painful times for MENA and Muslim students. Essie, Parisa, Nora, Yasmine: thank you so much for your consistent kindness and generosity with your time.

Finally, I want to thank Jenna, Sarah, and Kaden for being my rocks throughout the year as we all worked on our theses in four different departments. Living under the same roof as people so brilliant has undoubtedly aided my own intellectual growth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In September 2015, I first set out to begin this project by determining what I could intellectually commit to and emotionally invest in for an entire academic year. Over the course of the year, the project, as well as my thinking on it, has evolved considerably. The question I sought to answer was as follows: Given the racial profiling of the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) population at a global scale post 9/11, how have U.S. college students of MENA descent experienced social spaces in predominantly White institutions of higher education? I sought to answer this question for a variety of reasons. First, as an Egyptian American student at a predominantly white, elite, liberal arts college, this question was personal and a topic that I was deeply interested in studying. In addition, as I began searching for books, articles, and other scholarly works, I realized that MENA American college students had never had their experiences documented or studied through formal research.

As much of my analyses try to make meaning of how the large, structural issue of anti-MENA pervades the daily lives of those it targets, this is ultimately a study about students with real lives that they make meaning from; such meaning-making ultimately determined the way they interacted with this project. This study sought to make sense of the complex phenomenon of anti-MENA racism that affects the lived experiences and the daily lives of real people. Social science research, as described by Tuck and Yang (2001), produces settler colonial knowledge; however, in centering the voices of the participants in this study, I aim to decolonize, or, as Tuck and Yang suggest, “de-Orientalize” the experiences of U.S. citizens of MENA descent.

The Middle Eastern and North African category is, in part a geographically determined category. The Middle East, roughly synonymous with the geographic term West Asia,

represents a wide variety of countries, cultures, ethnic groups, etc. North Africa includes the northernmost countries on the continent of Africa, whose peoples hold a great deal in common with those in the Middle East due to both history and contemporary influences. It is also geographically determined by residence in the U.S. As a MENA American myself, for example, I have only ever experienced the American racial hierarchy and system of white supremacy. Similarly, the students in my study have lived in the U.S. for more than five years.

Though geographically determined, in part, the MENA category is also considered a racial category. Though I use the term “Middle Eastern and North African” to refer to a single racial group, I do not presume that all people who fall into this group face the same challenges or have the same experiences. What I do imply through the construction of this racial group is that there is in fact a common denominator that affects their lives, in addition to the other identities they possess. This racial identity is one identity of many that intersect and collectively influence each individual’s experiences.

In this project, I acknowledge the MENA category as partly geographically based, but focus on the kinds of experiences MENA Americans have with regards to their racial identity including the ways that geographic associations contribute to the racialization process of MENA students in postsecondary education. Like other targeted racial groups in the U.S., MENA Americans have had a complex history of racialization in the United States. While anti-MENA racism has not been studied to the same degree as other forms of racism, it shares much in common with them.

Racism in the United States has been part of society since the beginning of European colonization of the American continents. Beginning with the colonial ventures of various

European powers, the Spanish, English, and French wiped out much of the indigenous population of the North American continent (Horse, 2001). This was supported by ideologies of domination and superiority that placed the White race above all others. Indigenous Americans were constructed as savages of inferior culture that needed to be conquered and were thus displaced from their lands to make room for European settlers (Salaita, 2006). In the modern day, many Native American groups fight for the rights to control their historic lands, and to be truly safe in their original lands.

Of course, one of the most common events in the discussion of the United States' history of racism is the institution of slavery. While Europeans believed they could better the land, they could not do it alone. By capturing and enslaving African people, Europeans established a system by which they could profit from the land. Europeans did not see these African slaves as people at all, and treated them as property (Harris, 1993). Part of White privilege has always relied on this dehumanization, and justified various housing and property laws long after the end of slavery that sought to create a system in which only White people were fully human, fully people, and fully citizens (Lipsitz, 1993). The Black community has continued to face intense struggles through police brutality, job discrimination, and many other forms of institutionalized oppression.

The Asian community has always faced discrimination in the United States. In particular, Asian immigrants were excluded from full participation in society by Asian Exclusion Acts that denied them citizenship on the basis of their race. Beyond this, immigration quotas restricted the number of Asian migrants who could enter the United States at all (Kuo, 1998). Additionally, specific groups have been targets of various forms of specific discrimination over the years. For

example, Japanese Americans were interned during World War II due to mistrust that denied they could ever fit in to American society, and instead would always be loyal to their “home country” (Salaita, 2006). In the modern day, Asian Americans face major forms of erasure due to the model minority myth that posits them as a successful, fully assimilated group that other groups of color should seek to emulate (Kuo, 2015).

Latinx people, who are of Central and South American, as well as Caribbean, origin, have always held a racially ambiguous position in American society. During the era of *de jure* school segregation, Latinx students were in a unique position in that they were officially categorized as White, but still were segregated from those White students of European descent (Strum, 2010). Furthermore, Latinx people have become targets for specific forms of racism that seek to limit their entry into the United States. For example, a current candidate for president of the United States, Donald Trump, wants to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent further entry of Mexicans (Trump, 2016). To this day, Latinx people do not have their own racial category, and are instead identified as an ethnic group in which members can be of any race.

MENA peoples have also had their own history of racialization and racial oppression in the U.S.. I explore this at length in the second chapter. However, here I note that their racial history mirrors that of several other populations of color and intersects with experiences of racial oppression. For example, similar to the Latinx population, the official, governmental designation of MENA Americans is White, and thus they are including in a racial group with which many MENA students do not identify. However, there are also distinct differences in how the MENA population has experienced oppression. For example, due to this White status,

MENA Americans have not been afforded the same legal protections that other groups have had in terms of discrimination.

This study is very much centered in the here and now, but is also grounded in the specific histories that have led to the current manifestations of anti-MENA racism in the United States. In particular, September 11th, 2001 serves as an important point in the history of MENA Americans and how they have been perceived in the United States. While the United States' involvement in wars in the Middle East has certainly occurred prior to those spurred by 9/11, including the First Iraq War and war in Kuwait in 1991, 9/11 is seen by some as a turning point after which the MENA region and MENA Americans were forever marked as foreign, dangerous, and other (Salaita, 2006) . It has only been 15 years since 9/11, and it continues to remain a large part of the American consciousness. Very recently, 9/11 has become a major topic as a former senator appeared on the television series *60 Minutes* to advocate for the declassification of a U.S. government report known as the "28 pages" (Kroft, 2016).

Most recently, terrorist attacks carried out by Daesh (otherwise known as ISIS or the Islamic State) in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere on the European continent have reinvigorated anti-MENA racism and Islamophobia. Furthermore, the crisis in Syria that has resulted in massive numbers of refugees seeking asylum in Europe, North America, and elsewhere has caused people to continue to reckon with how MENA people fit (or do not fit) into our societies. Additionally, for MENA people, negative feelings in the public sphere have reminded us of our place, or lack thereof, in American society.

We also stand at a point at which MENA Americans may finally be officially recognized as a racial group by the United States government. The Census Bureau is considering adding a

Middle Eastern and North African racial category to the 2020 census. This change would have to be adopted by the Office of Budget and Management, and would finally allow MENA Americans to be counted. It would further create a domino effect that would require public and private institutions to adopt this category, and thus allow MENA Americans to be supported by programs, like affirmative action, that seek to redress wrongs committed against various subordinated groups throughout American history.

My research question is: given the racial profiling of the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) population at a global scale post 9/11, how have U.S. college students of MENA descent experienced social spaces in predominantly White institutions of higher education? By focusing on PWIs, I chose an environment in which MENA Americans are most likely to feel as if they are racially othered or isolated. This was done intentionally to locate the specific instances in which this system of exclusion operates on both an institutional and interpersonal level. A study focused on PWIs allows an approach that takes into account the effects and powers of white supremacy at the level of higher education.

MENA Americans are racially categorized as White, and are thus unable to be supported from programs that seek to serve students of color in the United States. For example, MENA Americans are not aided by affirmative action, which seeks to combat the historical exclusion of many groups, people of color and others, from education (and the workforce). As John Tehranian notes in his book, *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, he was nearly denied a tenured faculty position on the basis that they were specifically seeking a person of color, and he did not count. Though this decision was reversed because it was not

legal, it remains a reality that MENA Americans are not supported by affirmative action, and thus institutions may exclude them entirely.

This is an issue of representation, support, and service. MENA Americans are underrepresented and underacknowledged as a racial group in schools, though it is difficult to know the extent without demographic data that counts them and without research that centers their experiences.

Organization

This work is divided into five chapters beyond this introduction. In Chapter 2, I offer a detailed account of the histories of MENA Americans in the United States, particularly focused on patterns of Arab and Iranian immigration. I detail the trials of attaining citizenship for these early immigrants, and how their successes and failures helped create the path to the current discrimination faced by MENA Americans.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology and methods of this study. Rooted in a critical race theory framework and guided by a critical raced-gendered epistemology, this is a mixed-methods study in which I gather both quantitative and qualitative data. I use grounded theory to analyze my data.

In Chapter 4, I begin to analyze the results of my data collection. In particular, I focus on the recurring themes of microaggressions and isolation, and how my respondents experienced these in various contexts in their institutions. In this chapter, I additionally begin to note the deficient systems in place in higher education for the support of MENA students.

In Chapter 5, I specifically analyze the unique intersection of race and religion that exists for MENA Americans, beginning with my participants' responses. From there, I build the ideas of a racial-religious theoretical framework that can be used to understand racial-religious oppressions. I build upon this framework by crafting and detailing the features of racial Islamophobia, a racial-religious oppression that affects MENA Americans (and others such as Sikh men). Additionally, I specifically discuss anti-MENA racism as a racial-religious oppression.

In Chapter 6, I offer concluding thoughts. Additionally, I reflect on the position of Palestine in understanding anti-MENA racism, both broadly and in higher education. I additionally offer my perspective on what must be done to improve the situation of MENA Americans, inside and outside of higher education.

Chapter 2: Constructing Middle Easterners and North Africans

Histories of Names, Immigration Patterns, and Checking Boxes

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans are a heterogeneous group with ambiguous status and classification in the United States. Throughout history, MENA Americans have been classified as Turks, Asiatic, White, and Other. The ever-changing identity of this group has as much to do with outside perception as it does with the members' self-identification. Nationality, citizenship, religion, and color all play a role in the changing identity of this group. Further, beyond these additional identity categories and their intersections, MENA Americans have been defined temporally in relation to the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11th, 2001. Although MENA Americans always held an ambiguous position in which they were legally White but socially not-quite-White, the aftermath of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks committed by those of MENA descent has solidified the place of MENA people as a group subordinate to White citizens in the American racial project.

Before discussing who MENA people are, it is important to answer the question: what exactly is the "Middle East"? While "North Africa" clearly positions a geographic location based on a continent and a cardinal direction, "Middle East" is far less explanatory. Of course, whatever this region is, it is only east of the Americas and Europe, thereby privileging such Western perspectives. Additionally, the question remains – "The middle of what"? (Nick, 2013). American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan referred to the Middle East as everything from Turkey to the Arabian Peninsula in the north-south direction and Egypt to Iran in the west-east direction (Tehrani, 2009, p. 65). This definition does not clearly include or exclude the Caucasus Mountains, in which Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are located. However, clarity

was likely not the goal for Mahan and those who adopted his definition. Rather, it is likely that power was, whether explicit or not, the true goal. Tehranian argued:

[T]he naming process is intricately related to exercise of power. Specifically, the creation of synoptic categories represents an essential step in a state's nation-building process in that it advances the government's ability to track and control both its subjects and those who might pose a threat from without. (p. 68)

It seems peculiar that in the naming of the Middle East, the U.S. government opted not to specifically categorize MENA Americans in a category outside of White. However, the history of MENA immigration to the U.S. reveals that a tension has always existed, particularly when the question of citizenship was concerned

Prior to the 1960s, the majority of MENA Americans had immigrated from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and historic Palestine, an area collectively referred to as the Levant (Kayyali, 2013; Naber, 2012; Tehranian, 2009). According to Kayyali, the U.S. had begun collecting information on residents' racial demographics in 1790 and country of birth in 1890. These practices were established under the pretense that races were absolute, and "constitute[d] the true condition of the American population", thereby providing a means for directing governmental policy. However, modern racial categories are not in fact based in biology. "Ostensibly, the government formally maintains that such classifications reflect 'a social definition of race recognized in this country. They do not conform to any biology, anthropological, or genetic criteria'" (Tehranian, 2009, p. 37). However, when groups such as MENA Americans do not quite fit into the established boxes, it is hard to have tangible effects on policy.

The Ottoman Empire controlled much of the modern-day Middle East during the early years of the U.S. census. Because of this, Arabs from the Ottoman Province of “Syria” (which contained the entire Levant) were classified as “Asiatic” or “Turkey in Asia” on the census (Kayyali, 2013). I will refer to this region as the Levant for the sake of consistency across various time periods, while acknowledging that the exact composition of this region in terms of sovereignty and nationalities has shifted over time. Of the immigrants from the Levant at this time, it is estimated that approximately 95% were Christian, with the rest being Muslim or Druze. Religion, early on, served a proxy for and accompaniment to race, which was later important in reclassifying Levantines as White.

During the late nineteenth century, amidst these first waves of MENA immigration, there were strong anti-Asian sentiments spreading throughout the United States. In 1875, Congress ruled that Asian peoples were ineligible for American citizenship (Kayyali, 2013). This was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1885 and immigration quotas being placed on Asian countries. This thread of Asian peoples as foreigners also eventually led to Japanese American internment during World War II. The time was ripe for Levantine Americans to fight to avoid these quotas and racial hierarchies as they began. These early MENA Americans saw their best option as getting the Supreme Court to rule that they were White. It is interesting to note that in addition to White people, Black people were eligible for citizenship; however, in all immigration cases but one between 1878 and 1952, those petitioning for naturalization sought to be declared racially White (Tehrani, 2009, p. 39).

In 1907, the Senate had formed the Dillingham Commission to review the history of immigration to the United States, which resulted in some contradictory conclusions about the Middle East.

When dealing with individuals of Middle Eastern descent, the report took a divided view: 'Physically the modern Syrians are of mixed Syrian, Arabian, and even Jewish blood. They belong to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks, who are in origin Mongolian.' The report ultimately concluded that Syrians were barely white and that Turks were categorically not white; other proximate groups remained unclassified. (Tehrani, 2009, p. 61)

This was demonstrative of the interesting interplay that began to exist between the various people of the Middle East in how they were treated by the courts. A judge ruled that Armenians were White based on civilizational ties to Europe and the lack of any racial purity in the Middle East in *Halladjian* (Tehrani, 2009, p. 51). In *Cartozian*, the judge drew a distinction between Armenians and other Middle Eastern ethnic groups, based on their religion, intermarriage with (White) Americans, and class (p. 52-53). While Armenians were repeatedly classified as White, for Arabs the courts were far less consistent. In several court cases initiated by various immigrant groups in the early 1900s, Arab people from the Levant argued that they were in fact not Asiatic because they were not "Mongolian", the same language used in the Dillingham Commission's report. They argued that they were Semitic in origin, and therefore belonged to the Caucasian race (Kayyali, 2013). In 1914, a Syrian immigrant named George Dow sued for citizenship on the grounds that he was White. However, a local court found that the "free white persons" doctrine applied only to Christian Europeans (Naber, 2008, p. 21). The Fourth Circuit

overruled this, seemingly officially affording Levantine immigrants the status of “White” (Tehrani, 2009, p. 57). Similarly, the court recognized them as “Syrians” instead of as Turks for the first time. Beyond the fact that Turks were considered not white in the aforementioned Senate report, this was a strategic move for Arabs because Americans associated Turks with Islam, whereas the majority of these early immigrants were Christian.

In fact, Christianity was proving to be an important factor, if not an outright prerequisite, for attaining citizenship. In 1942, a Yemeni Arab named Ahmed Hassan was ruled by a U.S. district court to be not white due to his dark skin and the fact that he was Muslim (Naber, 2008, p. 22; Tehrani, 2008, p. 58). In the same year, Mohamed Mohriez was ruled White in a court in Massachusetts due to “civilizational ties” between the Middle East and Europe, such as algebra, medicine, and architecture (p. 59). This logic, in some ways, mirrored that used to grant Armenians citizenship. However, the idea of religion serving as a proxy for race was rooted very much in the interactions between early European settlers and both the indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved African people. In the early days of the American colonies, “instead of a bifurcation between white and black to define the Self and the Other, the English called themselves ‘Christians’ while referring to the Others – the Africans – as ‘heathens’” (Tehrani, 2009, p. 38). Naber (2008) notes that Native American people were similarly viewed as “heathens” because they did not practice Christianity. Thus, before the racial project based on skin color began in the United States, religion was a factor that allowed White Europeans to establish themselves as superior to religiously inferior Others.

Over the years, the pattern of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa has changed. Since the 1960s, there has been a shift in the country of origin for many MENA

Americans. Many more people have come from Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt, for example (Naber, 2012). Phenotypically, many people from these countries are more likely to have darker-skin, though this is not necessarily an excluder from the category of “Caucasian”. Even the people in India, regardless of skin color are considered Caucasian under the outdated anthropological definition of race. In fact, this definition led to Indians being classified differently in nearly every U.S. census between 1910 and 2000 (Tehrani, 2008, p. 169). However, in the United States, where race has historically been constructed primarily as White versus Black, phenotype, particularly skin color becomes significantly more important. Ahmed Hassan, of Yemeni descent, proved this in his naturalization trial, despite occurring twenty years before major waves of immigrants began to arrive from those parts of MENA where darker skin is more common. Furthermore, these later immigrants were far more likely to be Muslim than Christian, and thus struggled to assimilate to the same degree that early MENA immigrants had (Ghazal Read, 2008, p. 308).

Even MENA Americans who were officially classified as White were not necessarily treated as such. This is exemplified in the story of Nola Romey, a Syrian immigrant who lived with his wife, Fannie, and their two children in Florida. Their story is told by Sarah M.A. Gualtieri in a chapter entitled *Strange Fruit: Syrian Immigrants, Extralegal Violence, and Racial Formation in the United States* (2008). Gualtieri noted that, in the South,

[Syrians] arrival... was in fact viewed by native middle- and upper-class whites as a way to deprive blacks of potential economic opportunity. Syrians were not, in the words of a South Carolina senator, ‘our kind of people’, but they nonetheless contributed to a

culture of segregation in which their economic success did not greatly threaten the livelihood of native whites. (p.156)

Nonetheless, the Romey family was far from safe. A minor dispute between Fannie and the local police regarding the placement of the Romeys' vegetable stand on the sidewalk led to her death by shooting and Nola's arrest. Nola was taken by a mob and lynched. The reaction among southern Syrian communities was swift. "Romey's 'whiteness' mattered to Syrians because his lynch summoned fears among them that they had become, in that instant, surrogate blacks" (p. 165). In an age in which race was thought of as simply Black and White, Syrian people in the United States had much to lose if their status as White was not secure. However, the lynching of Nola Romey and the shooting of Fannie indicate that those from Syrian, and by extension all MENA Americans, have never truly been safe and accepted into American Whiteness.

The History of Iranians in the United States

Iranian people arrived much later than other MENA groups, with most coming after 1979. Like those from Arab countries, Iranian people in the United States have a history of discrimination, with a great deal of this discrimination at the level of the state, in addition to the various interpersonal instances of racism that have occurred. The history of Iranians in the U.S. has been characterized as a "political saga" by Mobasher (2012), who provides one of the most detailed accounts of their history. This "political saga" is due to the back-and-forth way in which those of Iranian descent have been viewed favorably, unfavorably, and oscillating between the two as U.S. relations with Iran have changed (p. 2). Before the Iranian Revolution

of 1979, the U.S. and Iran maintained strong ties that have since weakened, though the recent Nuclear Deal may bring about further changes.

American perception of Iranians has been largely tied to the government's diplomatic relations with Iran. Gallup polls taken in 1976 and 1989 (ten years after the Iranian Revolution) show a stark contrast in American views of Iran, with the former showing only 37% of Americans having an unfavorable opinion on Iran and the later showing a dramatic increase to 91% (H. Gallup, 1972; G. Gallup, 1989; Mobasher, 2012). Furthermore, in 1979, the American embassy in Tehran was taken hostage with all of the American personnel trapped inside. This, often referred to as the Iranian hostage crisis (herein simply referred to as the "hostage crisis"), "created a wave of American backlash protests against Iranians in U.S. cities from coast to coast" (p. 34). Mobasher noted:

[T]he insults, attacks, humiliations, racist agitations, and restrictions, and propaganda against the Iranian government during and after the hostage crisis heartened the social identity of Iranian immigrants and excluded them from full participation in American society. (p. 87)

This backlash was especially dangerous on college campuses. At the University of Nevada, a group of American students tried to attack a group of Iranian students with beer bottles and golf clubs. The Ku Klux Klan, the most well-known racist, white supremacist group in the U.S., threatened to attack the 200 Iranian students at Alabama A&M University (p. 25).

The Modern Political Saga of MENA Americans

In the present day, it has become increasingly common for MENA Americans to identify racially as “Other”, given the options on most government forms. The racial categories officially recognized by the United States Office of Budget and Management, which controls the census, are White/Caucasian, African American/Black, Asian, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Native American (Beydoun, 2015). While the census officially states that the White/Caucasian category includes those whose origins are in the Middle East and North Africa, many MENA Americans reject this classification [Naber, 2008)]. At the same time, MENA Americans do not typically identify with the geographic continents of their specific national origin. “Arab Americans might identify *with* ‘people of color’ but they very rarely identify *as* Asian or black” (Shryock, 2008, p. 100, emphases in original). In other words, MENA Americans are left without the ability to self-identify in a way that actually matches their identity.

The degree to which skin color plays a role in MENA American identity is varied. Some identify with olive, brown, or gray (that is, in between white and black) (Cainkar, 2008, p. 65). However, the fact remains that some MENA Americans reject color entirely as a basis for race. One Kuwaiti American remarked that while her neighbor was lighter-skinned than her, this neighbor was considered Black and she herself legally considered White (p. 66).

However, despite the wide variation in skin color of MENA Americans, certain stereotypes have taken hold, particularly in the post-9/11 American society. Since 9/11, there has been a conflation of MENA and Muslim as synonymous and interchangeable identity categories. The construction of a dark-skinned, bearded Muslim man has become a stand-in for MENA American men, while a woman wearing a *hijab* or headscarf has become a stand-in for

MENA American women (Naber, 2008, p. 294-295). In fact, a woman wearing a *hijab* is just as likely to be “an Indonesian, a Bangladeshi, or a ‘white’ convert from Omaha” as she is to be from MENA. The largest population of Muslims in the world is in Indonesia, far from the MENA region. Similarly, stereotypes of MENA men have led to attacks on Sikh men, “who are neither Arab nor Muslim” (Shryock, 2008, p. 93). Regardless of MENA Americans’ own perceptions of their race or skin color, society at large seems to have decided who they are and what they look like.

The conflation of being Muslim and being from MENA is unlikely to change without a major shift in public consciousness that includes adequate and accurate education on the differences between these identity categories.¹ One piece explored “Muslim” as an ethnonym for those of MENA descent, in conjunction with exploring “Middle Eastern”, “Arab”, and “White” (Nick, 2013). The ethnonym “Arab” is problematic because there are many other ethnic minorities in countries that would be considered “Arab countries”. “Non-Arab ethnic minorities include, but are not limited to, Kurds, Amazighs, and Armenians” (Naber, 2012, p. 29). Additionally, countries often included in the MENA region, particularly Turkey and Iran, are not Arab countries. Finally, using “Arab” as an ethnonym attempts to establish identity on a linguistic basis. However, this creates an issue similar to that faced by the usage of “Hispanic” as an ethnonym (Nick, 2013). Initially, “Hispanic” and “Latino” were established as an attempt to tie together a wide swath of people who spoke Spanish primarily, but now, when one-fifth of Latino Americans report speaking only English at home, this linguistic prerequisite seems to

¹ MENA is a geographical region that is home to many ethnic groups. “Arab” is a term referring to one of the major ethnic groups in this region, encompassing the residents of many countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, and Algeria. “Islam” refers to a religion, adherents of which are called “Muslims”.

require reevaluation. Using Arab as a broad ethnonym for MENA Americans poses similar challenges.

Another ethnonym that has been proposed is “Middle Easterner/Middle Eastern American”. This more inclusive term would include Arab countries, Israel, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iran. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this term is problematic because it is Western-centric. It is not a term indigenous to the region, and has primarily been used by scholars and others from outside this region. Similarly, the proposed ethnonym “Muslim-American” relies on an American (and Western) notion that everyone from the MENA region is Muslim. As explained earlier, there are significant Christian populations in the Levant region, not to mention the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt, the Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African descent) Jewish population in Israel, and other religious groups (especially Druze) throughout the region (Naber, 2012, p. 29). As explained earlier, there are also significant Muslim populations outside of the MENA region.

Recently, there has been a push for the Office of Budget and Management to create a new category on the census titled “Middle Eastern and North African”. For the 2010 census, a campaign called “Check it right, you ain’t white” was created to encourage Arab and Iranian Americans to check the “Other” box on the census and write in “MENA” or their specific ethnicity or nationality. TAKE ON HATE, an ongoing campaign that challenges the discrimination of Arab and Muslim Americans, produced a report in 2015 documenting reasons to move toward a MENA category. One important reason was the perception by MENA Americans that they are classified as White without benefitting from white privilege. Additionally, by officially designating MENA Americans as a minority group, they would gain significant political power by

giving politicians and elected officials strong reason to actually engage in partnerships with this group (Beydoun, 2015). Tehranian notes that, "...the refusal to keep statistics about Americans of Middle Eastern descent – as distinct from those of European descent – has forestalled analysis and resolution of the specific issues facing Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Americans, problems that have grown more exigent in the post-9/11 world order" (p. 8-9). At this moment, MENA Americans remain invisible under the law.

Whiteness, Anti-MENA Racism, and the Aftermath of 9/11

At its core, the social exclusion of Arabs in the United States has been a racial project because Arab inferiority has been constructed and sold to the American public using essentialist constructions of human difference. (Cainkar, 2008, p. 34)

I contend that the root of and basis for anti-MENA racism in the United States is Orientalism. Orientalism, detailed by Edward Said, a Palestinian-American scholar, in the seminal text *Orientalism*, can be described using its many characteristics. It is, of course, important the Said is Palestinian. Writing in 1979, he noted, "[T]he life of an Arab Palestinian... in America is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist" (p. 27). He further described the general affinity of American liberals for Zionism, the ideology of Jewish nationalism that established the state of Israel by expelling 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and land (Smith, 2013). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, to this day, failed to yield a solution, and a Palestinian state has yet to form.

The first and foremost characteristic of Orientalism is that "the Orient", the East, is not a natural phenomenon, and is only constructed relative to "the Occident", the West, or Europe

(Said, 1979, page 5). “The Orient” originally referred to the Muslim countries of the Middle East, including Turkey, Iran, and the Arab countries excluding North Africa, One way in which Orientalism manifests itself, originating in German Orientalism, is through intellectual authority of Westerners over that which is constructed as the Orient, that is, the Middle East.

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. (Said, 1979, p. 21)

This intellectual authority can further be thought of as Western superiority over every aspect of Oriental (referring to the peoples of “the Orient”) society (p. 42). It is one method by which anti-MENA racism is constructed and legitimized through deceptively academic discourses. A hallmark of the various forms of racism in the United States is that which constructs non-White races as inferior in all aspects, including intellectually, as evidenced by the claims of White supremacists that non-European societies have not contributed much to modern civilization.

Furthermore, the construction of the Orient relies on a power imbalance between the West and the East, which of course tilts in favor of the West. There is no such discipline as Occidentalism, and what does exist is certainly not “symmetrical” (Said, 1979, p. 50). That is, there is no academic study of “the Occident” as a monolithic subject of “reasoned” and “object” scrutiny as there is for “the Orient”. As with all forms of oppression, a power dynamic is essential for upholding the system. In this case, the system of anti-MENA racism, and racism more broadly in the United States, is built upon White supremacy and European domination. As

such, Orientalism clearly fits in to this scheme. Orientalism can be thought of as a tool of domination by which the West seeks to govern the East (Said, 1979, p. 95).

Steven Salaita (2006) took the following view of anti-Arab racism specifically (though he uses this term to encompass all anti-MENA racism): “[A]nti-Arab racism in the United States primarily is derivative – that is, it exists only because racism existed before the first Arab arrived in North America” (p. 123-124). However, he also noted that, “While anti-Arab racism is linked to other forms of American racism (including anti-Semitism), it nevertheless retains specific features relating directly to the interaction of Arabism and Americana, particularly as the American capitalist system came into contact with the resources of the Arab world” (p. 5). In this way, Salaita strongly implied that anti-Arab racism is built upon Orientalism. Orientalism, by claiming the inferiority of MENA civilizations, provided intellectual justification for the U.S. to attempt to control the aforementioned resources of the Arab world. Thus, Orientalism contributed to the nation-based racism targeting MENA countries. While I do see Orientalism as the root of anti-MENA racism in the United States, without the existence of racism against all other people of color, beginning with indigenous American peoples and enslaved people from Africa, anti-MENA racism would not have fully come into existence.

It is important to note that Orientalism does not simply oppress MENA people and Muslims. It is additionally a tool for oppression of Jews, who, like Arabs, are seen as a Semitic people (Rosenblum, 2007; Said, 1979, p. 99). Orientalism is also used to pit Arabs and Jews against each other, as Arabs are constructed as the force opposing Israel, which the West has constructed as its own outpost in the Middle East. This opposition is seen as undermining the goal of Jewish nationalism by tying the Israeli state to those that have oppressed Jews in many

ways throughout history (i.e. Europeans). European anti-Semitism was particularly rampant in the 1800s as Zionism was beginning to form (Said, 1979, p. 286). However, Orientalism is used to deflect European anti-Semitism by constructing Western forces as the true supporters of Israel and portraying Arabs, Iranians, and other MENA peoples as the true anti-Semites.

In examining the history of MENA people in the United States, it is important to discuss their connection to Whiteness, if any, and how that has resulted in their current racial subordination. Abdulrahim (2008) described Whiteness as follows: “Whiteness’ is a structuring system that operates through ‘unknowing’ and ‘unseeing’ racial subjects. In return it offers its subjects a location of structural advantage” (p. 133). As such, by taking a place in Whiteness, MENA Americans would have the ability to blend in and assimilate. As examined earlier, the role of Whiteness in securing immigration rights cannot be overstated. Tehranian (2009) offered this analysis of Whiteness’ part in achieving citizenship:

Instead, whiteness was determined through a performative lens. The potential for immigrants to assimilate within mainstream Anglo-American culture was put on trial. Successful litigants demonstrated evidence of whiteness: through their character, religious practices and beliefs, class orientation, language, ability to intermarry, and a host of other traits that had nothing to do with intrinsic racial grouping or even appearance. (p. 40)

Whiteness, therefore, was both carefully defined and undefined simultaneously. Whiteness was being unmarked; but it was also the ability to perform and conform to an expected set of behaviors, traits, and beliefs. However, Whiteness is itself a security blanket, a form of

property, and access to innumerable privileges, as articulated by Cheryl Harris (1993). Knowing this, it is clear that MENA Americans have never truly been participants in Whiteness.

That, however, has not stopped attempts at assimilation, both past and present. U.S. citizens of Iranian descent have tried to assimilate into the dominant standards of White supremacy. They have sought to meet White beauty standards through hair removal, plastic surgery, and other changes in appearance that would help them blend in and pass as White (Mostofi, 2003). Related to this, many Iranians have adopted the ethnonym “Persian” as it is perceived by Americans as less threatening, more exotic, and otherwise divorced from Iran as a nation (Mobasher, 2012, p. 60; Tehranian, 2009, p. 83). Mobasher notes that the adoption of a Persian ethnic label may also be tied to a rejection of the Islamization of Iran, indicating a return to the identity of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire. As Orientalism dictates, Islam, as a non-Western religion, cannot be part of Whiteness. On the contrary, Persian Jews have been able to pass as White despite Orientalism targeting Judaism. “By identifying themselves to the world as Jewish... Jewish Iranians tend to avoid any further questions about their ethnicity, as people assume their ethnicity is Jewish and that they therefore are white (i.e. Ashkenazi Jewish) and not Middle Eastern” (Tehranian, 2009, p. 82). This illustrates the complexity of the relationship between Orientalism and pre-existing forms of American racism.

Since 9/11, MENA Americans’ status as nonwhite has become very clear, as notions of “terrorism”, particularly committed by MENA people and Muslims, entered popular discourse. The construction of Islam and MENA people as sources of terror dates back to the Islamic conquests of the 7th century, by which the entirety of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Spain, parts of France, India, Indonesia, and parts of China all had significant numbers of

adherents of Islam (Said, 1979, p. 59). Europeans were very fearful after these conquests, which resulted in Islam coming “to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic” (p. 59). This European fear did not dissipate until the Ottoman Empire, the last Islamic empire, came to an end with the end of World War I. At this point, the fear was replaced by colonialism and other active forms of racism that situated Europe and the West as those in power over both the MENA region itself and the people therein.

The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) was particularly harmful to MENA Americans, affecting both Arabs and Iranians greatly. “The NSEERS singles out a limited class of noncitizens – male, nonimmigrant visa holders over the age of sixteen who are from one of twenty-five Muslim and Middle Eastern countries – for special registration requirements” (Tehranian, 2008, p. 70). This required registration led to many deportations for little more than visa-related violations (NIAC, 2006). According to NIAC, there is a closer tie between the War on Terror than actual immigration, as Iran remained on the the State Departments terror list after 9/11, despite the lack of evidence tying the country to these attacks, while Saudi Arabia avoided this treatment despite likely ties between the hijackers and this country. Iran has been declared a part of the “axis of evil” and thus an enemy of the United States, indefinitely (Mobasher, 2012, 161). NSEERS thus clearly had racist intentions, as it made the entire MENA region a target for discrimination.

Post 9/11 discrimination was not limited to the U.S. government, and pervaded society. There was a 1,600% increase in hate-based incidents against “persons perceived to be Arab, Muslim, or South Asian in the United States (between 2000 and 2001)” (Naber, 2008, p. 289-290). Furthermore, of Arab Americans 18 to 29, 76% report having experienced discrimination,

compared to only 31% of those 65 and older (Tehrani, 2009). This does not suggest that older Arab Americans are spared discrimination, but rather implies that younger ones are more attuned to their racial subordination in a post-9/11 world.

Why study MENA Americans?

Like many other groups, MENA Americans have experienced varying degrees of discrimination. Delgado compares and contrasts the discrimination faced by MENA Americans to that of other people of color in America (2012). In particular, Delgado seeks to highlight the issues of non-Black people of color given the American focus on a Black/White dichotomy, which fails to address the issues of those “in the blurry and gray portions of the divide” (Tehrani, 2009, p. 5). According to Delgado, MENA Americans faced a major shift in discrimination following 9/11, when they became racialized as terrorists. This view is supported by the previously described caricatures of MENA men and women as visibly Muslim.

Compared to other groups, there has not been significant research into the MENA American population. Most research has been focused on immigration experience and assimilation into mainstream American society. For example, one study found that second-generation Arab Americans faced different degrees of regulation by their families based on their gender, with adolescent girls finding that their family was far more concerned with their behavior than that of their brothers (Ajrouch, 2004). Additionally, studies have been done on the degree to which immigrants assimilated to a “White” identity, with one study finding that Lebanese and Syrian Americans were more likely to identify as White than Iraqi and Yemeni Americans (Ajrouch and Jamal, 2007). The authors of this study linked this to the longer

presence of Syrians and Lebanese in the United States, and the fact that these groups were in fact the ones who first secured the “White” label for MENA Americans in the early 1900s.

A recent study examined the identity development of Middle Eastern and Arab Americans belonging to sexual minorities, i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, etc. This study was the first of its kind, and was likened to similar studies done on other queer people of color (Ikizler, 2013). Ikizler examined the effects of “multiple minority oppressions” on this group, and used intersectional analyses on an understudied group. Similarly, one study focused specifically on the mental health of Arab Americans post-9/11, noting that Muslim Arab Americans faced higher rates of depression and other mental health issues than the general population, while Christian Arab Americans had more success and fewer mental health issues (Amer, 2005). In studying MENA Americans, intersectional approaches have been largely successful at examining race, ethnicity, immigrant status, color, gender, and sexual orientation.

However, MENA Americans are overall a significantly understudied group. In particular, it is rare to find work that groups MENA Americans together at all, rather than looking at specific ethnicities; John Tehranian’s *Whitewashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority* and the aforementioned study by Ayse Ikizler are the only ones of note.

There have been only a few studies on the experiences of MENA American students at the level of higher education. Existing research on MENA college students has focused on several different areas. One study examined learning styles and challenges of Middle Eastern students (not Americans of MENA descent) in a Canadian university (Lemke-Westcott, 2013), and another focused on the holistic college experiences of Jordanian students in an American university, including academic issues, cultural adjustments, and struggles with language (Alazzi

and Chiodo, 2006). A doctoral dissertation that aimed to focus on students of MENA heritage included only two students out of a sample of twelve that were American citizens, of which only one had lived in the United States for their² entire life (Neider, 2010). The lack of research on MENA American college students provides further justification for this study.

² I use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” to refer to a singular person whose gender is unknown or not relevant throughout this thesis. This is preferable to “he or she” and similar constructions because it is inclusive of those of all gender identities, including those who fall outside of the gender binary and do not use “he” or “she” as their gender pronouns.

Chapter 3: MENA American Students as Knowledge-Creators: Critical Race Framework and a Grounded Theory Approach

Framework, Epistemology, and Methodological Approach

Critical race theory emerged in the late 1980s in response to a series of events over the preceding decades. During the 1950s, the Supreme Court struck down school segregation in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which was followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Despite these impressive legal milestones, Nixon's presidency resulted in conservative justices being appointed to the Supreme Court who were far less interested in racial justice. Thus, a Critical Legal Studies conference was held by predominantly White faculty who were concerned with the future of legal issues for people of color. However, critical race theory grew from this based on the feeling the critical legal studies had failed to adequately address the issues faced by people of color, particularly Black Americans, despite that being the original goal of conference (Brown and Jackson, 2013).

Critical race theory posits that legal discourse is not race-neutral, and that legal redress is not enough to combat and dismantle the centuries of oppression faced by various groups of color in the United States. Furthermore, critical race theory sees racism as woven through the fabric of American society, rather than simply occurring through overt, racially-motivated actions. This framework is essential for understanding anti-MENA racism, though it was never explicitly included in critical race theory. "Since the darkening of Arabs began in earnest after the beneficiaries of the U.S. civil rights movement had been determined and the categories of 'non-white' and 'minority' had been set, Arabs have experienced the double burden of being

excluded from whiteness *and* mainstream recognition as people of color” (Cainkar, 2008, p. 49, emphasis in original). For this reason, critical race theory remains an imperfect framework for understanding the experiences of MENA Americans. However, because I posit that MENA Americans are people of color in spite of official categories, critical race theory is a good place to start. In fact, the exclusion of MENA Americans from critical race theory even though it was meant to highlight the situation of people of color, coupled with the fact that MENA Americans have been excluded from Whiteness despite successfully performing it in the early 20th century, clearly illustrates the unique, historically and presently ambiguous position occupied by MENA people in the American racial hierarchy.

Using a critical race theoretical framework, I also employ critical race methodology. Defined by Solorzano and Yosso (2002), critical race methodology includes the following components:

(a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses of race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color (p. 24)

In pursuing this project, race and racism have been the entire driving force. Simultaneously, my goal has been to specifically analyze the intersections of race with other parts of MENA students' identities. Appendix 1 contains all of the questions used in my survey, which specifically include several aimed at learning about intersections of race and other identities. As previously noted, this work is unique in that it certainly challenges the traditional conceptions around MENA students, which situates them as White rather than students of color, while simultaneously working to address the shortcomings of theories that, while aimed at including students of color, have still failed to include MENA Americans. Finally, as shown in the previous chapter, this work is grounded in history, sociology, law, education, and many other disciplines.

This project is a mixed methods study. I chose to conduct a survey to facilitate this approach. My intention was to use quantitative data to support the conclusions I reached from my qualitative data. To collect quantitative information, I asked respondents to rank the frequency with which they had experienced various circumstances on a Likert scale, and was then able to average these numbers. To collect qualitative data, I asked several open-ended questions for which respondents could write as much or as little as they wanted. I did this particularly with grounded theory in mind, as detailed in the following paragraph, as these open-ended questions allowed respondents to tell various parts of their individual stories. Ultimately, the numerical responses also aided my analysis of individuals' responses as I was able to situate their stories in their own self-rated context.

This work is guided by a critical raced-gendered epistemology in conjunction with a grounded theory methodology. Critical raced-gendered epistemology holds that the experiences of students of color are valuable sources of knowledge, and that story-telling,

especially counterstories, as well as narratives, testimonials, and other methods that specifically used the words of marginalized people as data help to challenge the dominant narrative and re-center those often at the margins of research and the academy (Delgado Bernal, 2002). By taking as given that the stories of my respondents are valuable data points by which knowledge can be generated, I simultaneously employ grounded theory. Grounded theory is built on the premise of “building theory from data” (Carey, 2012, p. 135).

Grounded theory is a recursive approach by which the researcher is constantly moving between literature review, data collection, and analysis until a saturation point is reached in the data. In my approach, I continued to reach out to potential participants as I analyzed data and searched for additional literature to support the analysis of my findings. Ultimately, I used the stories of my respondents to build new theoretical concepts, which will be elaborated upon in the following chapters. By building this theory out of the narratives of students of color, specifically MENA American students, I have centered their voices and made clear that their experiences are valuable sources of knowledge. In this way, my grounded theory is built upon a critical race theoretical framework and a critical raced-gendered epistemology.

The Survey Instrument

As described above, I crafted a survey to collect data from the MENA American students in this study. It was administered electronically through Google Forms. Google Forms allows a variety of question types including multiple-choice, short answer, longer paragraph, scale, and more. The flexibility in the software allows for the types of questions necessary to obtain appropriate data. Additionally, at the time of collection, Google Forms automatically produced a spreadsheet as responses were submitted (this feature has since been updated slightly, but

luckily no technical issues emerged during the update). An additional advantage to Google Forms is that it allows responses to be updated by participants, and allows participants to remain anonymous. The only identifying data collected from respondents other than their answers is a timestamp that records the time of submission, which is not traceable back to an individual.

The questions on the survey focused on the experiences of MENA American students in social spaces in their college experience. I have broadly defined “social spaces” to include the non-academic aspects of the college experience, thereby excluding traditional classroom experiences. While the existing research does not focus on MENA American students much at all, as mentioned in the last chapter, the very little research into MENA students has generally had a leaning toward classroom and academic experiences. Whereas the experiences of other students of color in social spaces in higher education have been documented using various critical race frameworks, epistemologies, and methodologies, that is not the case for MENA Americans. It is for this reason that I chose to focus on nonacademic aspects of the MENA American student experience.

Within the umbrella of “social spaces”, I have chosen to focus specifically on three areas. The first area is extracurricular activities, which I have defined to include clubs and organizations. These are not necessarily restricted to on-campus extracurricular activities, and may include local organizations. This is a necessity due to the fact that participants were recruited from student organizations focused on MENA ethnicity, culture, religion, and activism, thereby already indicating that these students are engaged in extracurricular activities. Furthermore, extracurricular activities provide an additional, socially important aspect to the

learning experience in higher education; for students of color in particular, extracurricular activities can provide solace from the racial realities of attending a predominantly White institution (Flores and Garcia, 2009).

The second of the three areas I focus on is work experiences, which includes both formal employment in jobs, as well as internships and volunteering. Work experiences constitute a different sphere of social space, particularly when issues of professional or appropriate conduct become involved. For example, dress and appearance codes in work environments often privilege a White, Eurocentric ideal that necessarily excludes traditional dress of communities of color. Additionally, appearance codes that require certain hairstyles are often particularly exclusionary of Black and African Americans whose natural hair may not be deemed “professional” or “appropriate” (Richards, 2014). Thus, examining work experiences in their own right is also important. In particular, given the intersection of MENA racial identity and Muslim religious identity, work experiences can provide unique insights. For example, women in hijab have not been hired for jobs in the retail industry in Abercrombie & Fitch stores, and have successfully sued over religious discrimination (Glenza, 2014). It is thus conceivable that MENA women would have work experiences related to their identity to discuss.

The final of three areas I focus on is “social scene”. This term is used to encompass parties, events, and other related categories that fall outside of extracurricular activities and work experiences. Colleges have often been home to parties that rely on racial stereotypes and culturally appropriative practices such as the wearing of blackface, sombreros, feathered headdress, bindis, and kimonos. This is a key feature of the 2014 film *Dear White People*, in

which a campus social club organizes a blackface-themed party. Stereotypes of MENA people are just as plentiful as for other racial groups, as seen yearly in Halloween costumes that give people the chance to dress up as caricatured “sheiks” or in a “sexy hijab”. Further, “social scenes” encompass the day-to-day experience outside of organized study, work, or clubs, and thus represent an important segment of social space in colleges and universities.

The questions are separated into several categories. The first set of questions aims at collecting demographic information. The questions ask for the participant’s age, year in college/university, gender, racial/ethnic identification, specific ethnic identification within the broader category of Middle Eastern and North African, identified country of origin within the Middle East and North Africa, religious identification, immigrant/generational status, and academic major or focus of study.

The question regarding racial/ethnic identification, in contrast to the U.S. census, is one unified question instead of two separate questions that ask about Hispanic/Latino origin apart from race. The categories given are White, Black or African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Latin American, Middle Eastern or North African, and other (with the option to write in an answer). These categories encompass all current categories on the U.S. census with the addition of an option for Middle Eastern or North African. As with the census, participants have the ability to check as many categories as they identify with. This is especially relevant as only two censuses thus far have allowed multiracial Americans to identify themselves as such, allowing for research to be undertaken for the last 16 years. Like MENA Americans, multiracial Americans were historically invisible, but are gradually entering the spotlight.

The following question, which asks for specific ethnic identification with Middle Eastern or North African, offers these options: Arab, Iranian/Persian, Turkish, Berber/Amazigh, and other (with the option to write in an answer). Arabs are the predominant ethnic group throughout the Middle East, and are indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula. Following the Islamic conquests of the 7th century C.E., North Africans became Arabized in culture, and Arab identification settled throughout the region. The indigenous peoples of Northwest Africa (that is, modern-day Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania) were known as Berber or Amazigh before this Arabization occurred. The roots of the term “Berber” are disputed, but generally agreed to have come from outside of the region, where “Amazigh” is the term used in the indigenous languages. Though those that identify as Berbers or Amazigh are the minority throughout North Africa, there has been a surge in this identity in the last thirty years (Jacobs, 2014). Finally, the ethnicities Turkish and Iranian/Persian account for the two other major ethnic groups in the MENA region (Tehrani, 2009).

On separating racial and ethnic identification into two separate questions, I use the definitions adopted by Vue (2013) based on the works of Cornell and Hartmann (2007). Vue described this difference as “as external ascriptions (race) as opposed to internal assertions (ethnicity)” (p. 17). In essence, “race” refers primarily to a set of physical characteristics that together with social perception construct a group identity. On the other hand, ethnicity refers to an identity based on shared cultural, national, or linguistic origin (Omi and Winant, 1994).

The countries listed in the following question about country of origin, include Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey,

United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and other (with the option to write in an answer). Of these countries, all except for Iran, Sudan, and Turkey are included in the United Nations definition of the Middle East and North Africa. Iran and Turkey are included due to their inclusion in the United Nations definition of “West Asia”, a more politically neutral term that is often used interchangeably with “the Middle East”. The term “West Asia” does not rely on a Eurocentric notion of some “middle” of the world map being east of some point. Sudan is included due to the Sudanese civil war highlighting the racial divide between Arab and Black tribes in the country. Prior to the partition of the country into Sudan and South Sudan, it was very common for Arabs to enslave the non-Arab, non-Muslim residents of the country, which has been interpreted as a racial conflict (State Department, 2002). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Arab Americans from North Africa rarely identify as Black, and this same dynamic may exist in Sudan.

The question of country of origin is significant due to the historical circumstances that led to MENA immigrants being officially categorized as White in the United States, as discussed in Chapter 2. Lighter-skinned immigrants from the Levant were able to obtain this classification in order to obtain rights to American citizenship, but more recent MENA immigrants have come from countries in which people are typically more dark-skinned and unable to pass as White. Similarly, the following two questions, about religious identification and generational status, aim to examine similar historically-based and empirically-supported categories through which MENA Americans have been able to assimilate. While Christians from the MENA region have had an easier time assimilating into American society, Muslims have struggled, particularly following 9/11. Similarly, third-generation or older MENA Americans have assimilated more

easily than those who are children of immigrants. This is illustrated by the number of Arab Americans in each generation who report having experienced discrimination based on their Arab identity.

All of these questions aim to provide context for an intersectional analysis. I hypothesized that religion and gender would be the most likely categories that would directly intersect with a MENA racial identity, but my questions also allowed for respondents to identify intersections with socioeconomic status, nationality, ethnicity, or any other identity important to any individual.

Following these demographic questions, the same set of questions is used in each of the three sections for extracurricular activities, work experience, and social scene. Each section begins by asking the participants to list the experiences under that category on which those answers are based. For example, the extracurricular activities section asks them to list the clubs and organizations they have been part of. This helps place their answers, both in this section and in the free-response section, in further context.

Then, there are five questions in which participants are asked to rank their experiences on a Likert scale of one to ten with one representing “never” and ten representing “always”. These questions focus on the themes of isolation, representation, and microaggressions. Steven Salaita (2006) suggested that these are common challenges faced by students of color in higher education. He does not collect data to support the application of this to Arab and MENA students, but theorizes that it is likely that this is the case based on his own experience as a Palestinian American, as well as his interactions with other MENA students both as a graduate student and as a professor.

Following these scale questions, there is one additional question in each section, which asks participants if their MENA identity has been conflated with other aspects of their identity in that given social space. This question further provides data for examining the intersections of MENA as a racial category with other parts of one's identity. It helps encourage students to think about this idea, in advance of the free response section in which participants have the opportunity to tell their stories about these intersections.

The other free-response questions aim to capture data relating to microaggressions, solidarity, stereotypes, and identity development. Overall, I aim to collect narratives in a variety of categories to be able to understand as much of each participants' story as possible.

Recruitment of Participants

My aim was to find participants who met four criteria. The first was purely for practical purposes, which was for participants to be 18 years of age or older, as those under 18 require an additional consent form to be completed by their parents. The other three criteria were determined by the goals of the study. The second criterion for participation was identification as Middle Eastern and/or North African, for clear and obvious reasons. The third criterion is U.S. citizenship, permanent residency, or having lived in the U.S. for five years or longer. As mentioned previously, the very little existing research on college students of MENA descent have focused on those in the U.S. just for education, and no studies have focused explicitly on MENA Americans. The final criterion was attendance at a predominantly White institution, which I defined as a college or university at which 50% or more of the student body identifies racially as White. This was specifically chosen due to my critical race framework, as critical race

theory was initially formed in part due to the underrepresentation of students of color in the academy.

I sought to recruit students through two methods. The first method was via social media. I created a blog on the platform Tumblr with the express purpose of recruiting for this survey. In the weeks that I managed this blog, I reposted the survey information once per day (called “reblogging” on Tumblr). Additionally, I sought to reblog posts by others that dealt with issues facing the MENA region and MENA Americans. I do not believe I had success using this method, but there is some ambiguity, as I will explain shortly.

In addition to this, I researched the student organizations at elite, predominantly White colleges and universities in the northeastern United States. I searched for specific cultural organizations (such Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Armenian Student Associations), religious organizations (primarily Muslim Student Unions, especially at schools without cultural organizations for MENA ethnic groups), and activist organizations focused on the MENA region (such as Students for Justice in Palestine and related organizations). I sent emails to the listed contact person for each organization, reaching out to a total of 24 organizations at 14 schools. In these emails, I asked the contact person to disseminate the survey both to the members of their organizations and to others they thought would be interested in participating if they met the criteria.

Ultimately, I received 16 responses, of which 12 met the criteria. These twelve were thus included in my analysis. Respondents came from seven different institutions, of which all but one had organizations I had specifically reached out to. Because one respondent was from a school I had not reached out to, it is possible that the respondent saw my post on Tumblr.

However, it is also possible that they received the survey through a referral, as described above. Below are summaries of important demographic information to keep in mind.

Figure 1: Summaries of Racial, Ethnic, and Religious Identity of Survey Respondents

RACIAL IDENTIFICATION	#
MENA only	8
MENA + Another Race	4

ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION	#
Arab only	8
Iranian/Persian only	2
Arab and Another Ethnicity	2

RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION	#
Muslim	7
Other religious identity	4

The results of the survey are discussed in the following chapters. Each of the next two chapters identifies one central theme that emerged in the responses given by my participants. The final chapter then, using a grounded theory approach, builds new theory based on these responses.

Chapter 4: Orientalism and the Experience of Cultural Violence

The Student Sample

This study yielded a total of 16 responses, of which 12 were included for statistical purposes and analysis. One respondent was excluded on the basis of identifying solely as Asian, rather than Middle Eastern and/or North African. A second respondent was excluded on the basis that she was only in the United States for higher education and had not lived in the U.S. at all prior to this. A third respondent was excluded for identifying as “Not American”, and so beyond the constraints of this study. A fourth respondent was excluded for not being a current student, and rather was a faculty member and alumna. From this point on, any reference to respondents will refer only to those respondents that were not excluded from the sample.

The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 22, and included at least two students in each year of college or university. Two students identified themselves as first-years, five identified themselves as second-years, three identified themselves as third-years, and two identified themselves as fourth-years. Racially, all of these students identified as Middle Eastern and/or North African. Of these, eight solely identified with this. Of the remaining four, one additionally identified as Asian, two additionally identified as White, and one additionally identified as both White and Black or African American. From the responses, it is not entirely clear if the respondents who selected multiple identities conceptualized themselves as multiracial, or if there was some other factor influencing their answer. While it is likely that the respondent who selected White, Black or African American, and Middle Eastern or North African did in fact identify as multiracial, it cannot be determined with certainty.

In terms of ethnicity, eight identified themselves solely as Arab. One identified as both Arab and Berber/Amazigh, and another identified as both Arab and Iranian/Persian. Two students identified solely as Iranian/Persian. In terms of specific countries of origin, three identified with Iran, four with Palestine, three with Lebanon, and one each with Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. 10 students identified as second-generation immigrants, and the remaining two identified as first-generation.

All students attended colleges at which White students constituted at least a plurality, with ten attending colleges in which White students were the majority on campus. All colleges were located in the northeastern United States across three states. All but one student attended a college which could be considered elite, being ranked in at least the top 25 in the U.S. News rankings for their respective categories.

Religiously, eight students identified solely as Muslim, one identified solely as Baha'i, and one identified solely with no affiliation. One student declined to respond to this question. Another identified as both Muslim and Agnostic/non-practicing Muslim.

Finally, it is significant to note that all of the students identified as women. Because of this, it is important to consider the important intersectionality contributing to their answers. I would be remiss to engage in a solely racial analysis; rather, I posit that this analysis calls for a raced-gendered epistemology that acknowledges the unique experiences of women of color. As Delgado Bernal noted, critical raced-gendered epistemologies take into account both the racist views in feminist movements and the sexist views in movements for people of color (2002). Further, Delgado Bernal suggests critical race theory (CRT) and Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit) as frameworks of critical raced-gendered epistemologies that challenge liberal ideas of

colorblindness and meritocracy. While CRT serves as the main framework, LatCrit is intended to supplement this by accounting for the coalitional Latinx panethnicity. Neither of these frameworks is entirely suitable for analyzing the experiences of MENA Americans, as MENA people have not been fully researched or accounted for in examining American white supremacy and racial hierarchies. However, both of these frameworks can provide a starting point for such an analysis.

In analyzing the answers written by my respondents, it is important to recognize my own position relative to theirs. While I do identify as both Middle Eastern and North African, specifically as an Egyptian Arab, I identify as a man. Additionally, as my mother is White, my MENA identity is within my biracial identity. This and my identity as a man mean that my intersectional experience has different from those of my respondents. In particular, my identity as a man has afforded me privilege in a way that my respondents have not experienced as women. It is important that I allow stories to be built from my respondents' answers. I emphasize this in order to account for my positionality and to allow my respondents to construct their own narratives.

Additionally, I have assigned pseudonyms to my respondents. In recognizing the importance of language and culture, I have assigned names reflective of their ethnic backgrounds. While I could have simply chosen names at random, doing so would have inevitably resulted in Eurocentric names. I feel that this would be disrespectful to my respondents who chose to share their personal experiences through my survey. While I am not suggesting that a MENA person could have a name typically associated with European

languages, I do want to recognize that names can be an important tie to culture, ethnicity, and race, and I want to respect that.

Microaggressions, Cultural Imperialism, and Racism in Action

In terms of quantitative results, the results are summarized below.

Table 1: Average Frequency of Various Events

	Extracurriculars	Work Experience	Social Scene	Average
Only MENA person in room	7.1	8.2	7.4	7.6
Felt like you had to represent all MENA people	6.9	6.3	7.4	6.9
Called a derogatory name due to MENA identity	3.0	1.9	3.1	2.7
Experienced violence due to MENA identity	3.1	2.0	1.8	2.3
Experienced microaggressions due to MENA identity	5.6	4.5	4.8	5.0

For each question, a Likert scale from 1 to 10 was given, with 1 being equated to “never” and 10 being equated to “always”. In all three categories, the experiences with the highest scores were that of being the only MENA person in the room and feeling like they had to represent all MENA people. Similarly, the two lowest scores were in the experiences of being called a derogatory name due to MENA identity and experiencing violence due to MENA identity.

However, simply looking at averages does not elucidate individual experiences. For example, though overall levels of violence and microaggressions were low, Samira, a woman of Arab and Berber/Amazigh Moroccan heritage, responded with 7s and 8s for answers to these questions in all categories. She elaborated on these responses in her answer to the question,

“What kinds of microaggressions, derogatory name-calling, or violence have you experienced in social spaces (extracurricular, work-related, or social scene) in college?”.

In college it hasn't been as bad as when I was in high-school, but mainly I've experienced violence at [name of university] in the form of cultural imperialism. From that comes the marginalization of Islam (mainly, quite honestly, by neo-atheists and avid zionists). This has resulted in people telling me that Islam (and what they see as "Arab society") is backwards, and therefore they are surprised that I am "progressive" and a feminist due to my faith and cultural background. Additionally, when I tell people that I'm Arab, they automatically conflate that "Arabness" with "Muslimness" which is just ridiculously homogenizing and doesn't acknowledge Arabs of other faiths.

Here, Samira makes reference to Edward Said's notion of cultural imperialism, which is heavily tied to orientalism. Said referred to Orientalism as “the study of imperialism and culture” for the construction of “the East” or “the Orient” by western European societies (Said, 1979, p. 14). Furthermore, he encourages thinking of Orientalism as “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient” (p. 95). Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, established modern criticism of orientalist ideology by critiquing the notions of western philosophers, particularly those of the Enlightenment. In essence, Said argues that the Middle East in particular, and Islam and the entire MENA region more broadly, have been cast as culturally inferior to western European civilizations, which justified the various forms of imperialism imposed on them by the British and French.

How Orientalism is Expressed in Daily Situations

Samira's notion of cultural imperialism as violence is very interesting. Though the question was certainly open to interpretation, my intent in its design was to capture situations of physical violence experienced by MENA Americans in various spaces. In fact, no respondent reported experiences of physical violence, and many of them made reference to issues of cultural imperialism that Samira made explicit in her response. Their answers collectively construct various kinds of verbal, emotional, and other non-physical forms of violence.

One of the major themes emerging from this set of responses is the role that Orientalism has played in shaping the experiences of my respondents. Laila (an Arab and Iranian/Persian woman with roots in Lebanon and Iran), Azizah (an Arab Palestinian woman), Zahrah (an Arab Libyan woman), and Intisar (an Arab woman of Iraqi and Palestinian descent) specifically point out stereotypes that have been levied in conversations with them. Laila notes having been called a terrorist, while Azizah has been asked if she is one. Azizah also reports having been asked if her parents own a gas station, conjuring up the Orientalist image of an oil sheikh. Intisar, on the other hand, has been targeted by the stereotype that Arabs hate Jews, noting, "As part of SJP [Students for Justice in Palestine], been called a nazi (sic)/Jew hater/terrorist way too many times. Been targeted in my workplace for "anti-Semitism" (really my vocal stance as anti-Zionist)". Orientalism relies on these racial stereotypes in order to uphold and support cultural imperialism. In particular, these stereotypes are used as a tool of dehumanization. By reducing a group of people to a simple set of characteristics, behaviors, or ideologies, individuals are erased and the group exists as a simple collection of these things. In

Intisar's case, Orientalism additionally works to divide those it oppresses and turn them against one another.

Jamila points out her belief that ignorance has influenced their experiences with microaggressions and other forms of violence. According to Jamila, "Misinformation seems to be the biggest micro aggression (sic). Ignorant comments that are meant to be funny or even certain questions phrased in certain ways have been micro aggressions (sic)". This ignorance of individual differences in MENA peoples is rooted in the cultural imperialism imposed on these groups for hundreds of years. Clearly, Orientalism has in fact taken root in not just institutional and statewide policies, but also in interpersonal interactions.

Orientalism has also led to both cultural and nation-based racism directed at MENA Americans. Cultural racism, as defined by Naber (2008), is the "process of othering that constructs perceived cultural (e.g. Arab), religious (e.g. Muslim) or civilizational (e.g. Arab and/or Muslim) differences as natural and insurmountable" (p. 279). Nation-based racism targets specific countries of origin. Nation-based racism has historically been used to target Asian immigrants, particularly Chinese immigrants through the Chinese Exclusion Act. Nation-based racism was also the ideology that allowed the internment of Japanese Americans during World War I. Nation-based racism has, since 9/11, been expanded to include MENA Americans as targets (Naber, 2008, p. 292). As Laila recalls having "forced participation in anti-MENA patriotic events", it is clear that nation-based racism has affected the lived experiences of MENA Americans.

The Role of 9/11 in the Experience of Anti-MENA Racism

A second theme that begins to emerge from these responses, specifically those of Noor and Intisar, is the role of institutions, colleges and universities in this case, in upholding anti-MENA racism. Noor and Intisar begin to elucidate the specific forms of anti-MENA racism that can take place at an institutional level, and how these forms of racism can look different than racism targeted at Black, Latinx, Asian, and other groups of color. Noor specifically points out the ways in which her university excluded the Arab student group from events aimed at students of color, as well as leaving them out of plans for a multicultural space that would specifically be serving students of color. In her words,

[T]here have been a lot of issue on our campus of the administration and students not acknowledging our presence. We were not invited to a diversity/multicultural 'mingle' hosted by the administration which included presidents from cultural orgs across campus, we are never personally reached out to when other minority orgs collaborate such as the Diversity Gala last year or POC open mic nights, and we were not included at all in the discussion of the new multicultural space which included students of Asian and Latin decent and LGBTQ students, leaving us to be the only minority group without any space or even a locker for our stuff (international students and students of African American decent have a house, each religious group has a space, and LGBTQ students already have a lot of unofficial spaces on campus. Also all orgs are given a locker, but somehow the Arab student group is neglected...) Also after the attacks in Beirut and Paris, there was a vigil with a banner for students to write and express their feelings. At some time at the end of December, a student wrote on the banner 'No Islam' and 'No

Muslims' and the administration has yet to send an email to the greater college community about this.

In this case, it is clear that a tactic of anti-MENA racism is the reliance on a whitewashed narrative of MENA identity. Because MENA students are categorized as White at the institutional level, they have been denied self-determination of their identities. Additionally, the White designator has been used to exclude Arab students at this university from spaces for other students of color, thereby leaving them, as a group, excluded from both White and people of color spaces.

Intisar hints at an institutional targeting of specific student groups, in her case, the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). SJP is a national organization with chapters on many college and university campuses including my own. The organization has come under attack by administration, faculty, alumnae/i, and students, in addition to media outlets. As Intisar notes, she has been called various names that paint her as someone who seeks to oppress Jews. Intisar notes that she has been called anti-Semitic in her workplace, and her answer to the question regarding her work experience indicates that she has held mostly jobs at her university. As a member of an institutionally targeted student group, while simultaneously having a MENA racial identity, Intisar has been called a "terrorist", a theme which continues in many other responses. Additionally, anti-MENA racism in her case has sought to pit her against another oppressed group in order to delegitimize her own experience. This tactic is often levied against groups of color, and has other examples for MENA people. In Europe, anti-MENA racism has claimed that MENA men are sexists, rapists, and other things that pit them against women. I reflect more on the specific place of Palestine in anti-MENA oppression in Chapter 6.

The role of 9/11 in changing the way MENA Americans are perceived and how they experience the world is complex and contested. As I have described earlier in this thesis, Orientalism has been present since the British and French first began to colonize the Middle East (for both) and North Africa (primarily for the French, though the British did have a presence in Egypt). My participants presented two clear positions on the role of 9/11, with some presenting a blended position that incorporated both and others not taking a clear stance, though it can be inferred which side they fell on. The first position presented was that 9/11 only reified existing anti-MENA and anti-Islam sentiments that were already present throughout American and Western society. The other position was that 9/11 was in fact a turning point after which MENA Americans, MENA people generally, and Muslims were cast as other and labelled as terrorists. Both perspectives have ample evidence presented by my respondents.

Four respondents (Samira, Laila, Intisar, and Zahrah) indicated that they believed that 9/11 merely reified existing opinions about the MENA region and MENA peoples, three of which took a blended approach also incorporated aspects of seeing 9/11 as a point of change for societal perceptions (Samira, Laila, and Zahrah). Intisar took a harder line, writing, "No, I think 9/11 only exacerbated pre existing prejudices. Derogatory sentiment/Anti Arab and Islamophobic sentiment have existed in the greater west for centuries (orientalism)." Like Samira's earlier response, Intisar makes reference to the role of Orientalism in American (and other Western) societies and how it has produced and contributed to anti-Arab racism, which, as I've stated before, I believe can be generalized to include all MENA people. Laila, who is identified as both Arab and Persian/Iranian, noted that "While I think [the events of 9/11] were

a catalyst for a lot of racist action, the events on 9/11 only served to validate and publicize national emotions and ideas against MENA Americans that were already there". Laila had previously noted her forced participation in anti-MENA patriotic events, supporting the idea that Orientalism has affected MENA people beyond Arabs, at least in Laila's case.

Zahrah noted very similar ideas as Laila had. She wrote, "I think it amplified things that already existed, like the terrorist trope and the rich oil mogul trope. It just brought that more into public consciousness and created a lot more hatred and violence and suspicion." Samira wrote a detailed response outlining the connections to Orientalism and cultural imperialism:

I definitely think that by many, all MENA Americans were viewed as responsible for this event. There was, and still is a constant villanization of MENA people and their societies and cultures in the West as a whole, mainly due to this tragic event. Reactions to 9/11 caused an uprise (sic) in violence against MENA people, and have been one of the most recent sources of fuel for the consistent orientalist discourse that has been occurring for ages. 9/11, along with recent events in Paris (both in November and January) have been used to create a kind of cultural imperialism that seeks to justify violence against MENA countries and people.

Samira's response straddles the line between 9/11 as a turning point versus 9/11 as a point of reification. She notes that there were pre-existing anti-MENA sentiments prior to this event, but that 9/11 did in fact make things worse. Further, she draws connections to the two recent terror attacks in Paris in late 2015 and early 2016 and how anti-MENA racism has become further entrenched as Americans and others use these events to justify racist policies (such as banning Syrian refugees) and racist interpersonal actions.

Four respondents (Azizah, Jamila, Noor, and Khadijah) indicated that they believed that 9/11 had in fact caused a change in the way that MENA Americans are perceived by American society. These responses generally referenced childhood events and the effects of growing up in the post-9/11 world. Khadijah indicated that she believed 9/11 changed the way MENA Americans are perceived, but did not elaborate beyond this. The others, however, expanded on their thoughts. Jamila wrote, "The violence of the radical few changes how we have experienced and interacted with the American public. I was called a terrorist in high school and was hyper aware of political complexities and issues at a very young age." Jamila's response further provides depth to the notion that MENA Americans have been constructed as terrorists in the post-9/11 world, with her having experienced this in high school. Further, she notes that this has essentially been her whole life as 9/11 occurred when she was a young age.

Azizah gave a longer response, writing:

I think 9/11 changed everything in the way MENA Americans are perceived. I have only lived my life in a post 9/11 society and feel that when I express to others about my MENA identity, I need to explain the crazy people in the world that were behind 9/11 and try to convince people that those are the outliers and not the majority of MENA society.

Her response echoes the sentiment of Jamila's, in that she directly sees 9/11 as having affected her whole life. Azizah also notes the defensiveness she experiences with regards to her identity as a MENA American. As with her previous answer, in which she had listed various stereotypes that have been ascribed to her that she has been forced to answer for, she notes that she feels the need to individualize herself in general but also in relation to those who carried out the

events of 9/11. Azizah's experience seems to have been deeply and directly affected by the anti-MENA racism prevalent in American society as a product of Orientalism.

Noor also gave a very detailed response, highlighting many of the same issues touched on by Jamila and Azizah.

For sure. I was only in 2nd grade at the time of the attacks, so I cannot speak from personal experience, but I believe that the rhetoric the media used perpetuated the idea that all Arabs and all Muslims are terrorists. This is also another incident of 'us vs them' where the All-American identity had to be strengthened to fight the other (the Arabs). You can see it happen time and again whenever an attack happens, the whole MENA population is blamed, attacks on MENA people increase, and hate speech rises.

Noor alludes to the many ways in which MENA people are directly affected every time a terrorist attack happens, noting the increase in both violence and hate speech following such events. Additionally, Noor points out biased media reporting that seeks to paint a one-sided image of all MENA people, rather than drawing any differences. Noor's and others have all pointed to this broken narrative that generates a collective of MENA people that are one, unchanging entity. This entity is stereotyped as a violent terrorist, and all individuals of MENA descent cease to exist, and rather function only as contributors to this stereotyped collective. This has created a frustrating and dangerous situation for all MENA Americans. As Noor points out, violence and hate speech both rise every time an event occurs that contributes to American society's narrative of MENA people as terrorists.

Scholars, like my respondents, are divided on the role that 9/11 has played in the MENA American experience. A small sampling of those cited throughout Chapter 2 reveals this

disagreement. John Tehranian (2009) believed that 9/11 only exacerbated existing tensions toward MENA Americans throughout society (p. 119). Nadine Naber (2012) felt similarly, claiming that Arabs went from a “minority” to a “problem minority” in the 1960s and 70s, particularly in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War on 1967 and the U.S.-Arab oil crisis (p. 36). Thus, for Naber, MENA Americans already held a troubled position in society. On the contrary, Steven Salaita believed that 9/11 was a major moment in the the history of MENA Americans. “It can be said that no single event shaped the destiny of Arab Americans more than 9/11” (Salaita, 2006, p. 77). Each of these scholars is of MENA descent, and like my respondents, do not all reach the same conclusion on whether 9/11 was a watershed moment or simply provided further justification for the continued oppression of MENA Americans.

As this chapter has shown, the women who responded to my survey face a unique and painful situation. Classified as White, their experiences have been erased or pushed aside due to the nature of White Americans as the dominant racial group in the United States, and the group that upholds racial hierarchy and white supremacy. Despite this classification, MENA Americans are clearly a racialized group outside of the White racial group in the United States. Beyond interpersonal oppression, which has clearly been experienced by the women in my study, they have experienced the institutional injustice of erasure and intentional exclusion. As I noted, the majority of my respondents identified themselves outside of the White racial category. By denying this group’s self-determination, in conjunction with the power dynamics and oppression they have experienced, MENA Americans have faced a great deal of violence at all levels of society.

Chapter 5: The Intersection of MENA Racial Identity and Religion: Moving Towards a New Framework

Islam as a Mediating Factor in Experiences

The respondents in my survey nearly unanimously noted the intersection that their racial identity has with religion, whether their actual religion or perceived one. Of the twelve respondents, ten answered that their religion had been conflated with their racial identity as a Middle Eastern or North African person in at least one of the three types of social spaces I examined. Of the remaining two respondents, one noted in the free-response section of the survey that her perceived religion intersected with her racial identity. The last respondent, unlike the rest, did not indicate that there were any intersections between her racial identity and her religion at all. It is clear from these results that religion is an important framework for analyzing the experiences of my respondents.

Two respondents in particular highlight the importance of their religion as it intersects with their identities as MENA women. Samira and Zahrah both described the way that being Muslim cannot be disentangled from their racial identities. Samira wrote:

For me, my identity as a MENA person has always been very strongly intertwined with my religious identity (Muslim). Mainly because whenever I go to Morocco (a country that is 99.8% Muslim). There I am constantly surrounded by the language of Islam and it one of the main ways in which I can connect with members of my MENA family.

Samira implies that she has traveled to Morocco at least several times, which is a foundation for the intersections in her identity. As she notes, Morocco is a predominantly Muslim country,

unlike the United States. Samira describes the “language of Islam” being dominant in Morocco, though she does not explicate any specific details. However, it should be noted that Islam has played a significant role in MENA societies (Lewis, 1998) today. While some countries have moved toward secularization, such as Turkey and Jordan, most countries in MENA have maintained their Muslim roots.

Zahrah makes the particularly bold statement that her racial identity as a MENA person is “meaningless” without her identity as a Muslim. She writes,

To me, my MENA identity is meaningless without my Muslim identity. They're conflated in the public sphere and very tied up in my head. I view it as an addendum to my Muslim identity, which is much more important to me. Being an Arab woman also has a whole host of issues with it, namely the ideas of passivity and oppression. I don't think Arab guys have to deal with that. Particularly as someone who wears hijab, this is salient.

The importance of her Muslim identity is very clear in this answer. She also mentions the fact that she wears a hijab, which has made her stand out further as a Muslim woman. While scholars of Islam disagree over whether covering the hair using a scarf, commonly referred to as a hijab, is mandatory, many Muslim women do engage in this practice. The veil has been used as an “us versus them” mechanism that separates Muslim women from “Americans”, who are constructed as White and Christian (Naber, 2008, p. 295). In recent years, Muslim women who do wear the hijab have been targets of discrimination in hiring (such as the Abercrombie and Fitch example in Chapter 3) and also have been targets of violence (Kale, 2016). In this way, Zahrah’s answer reflects the societal pressures that pervade American society for Muslim women. While people of color have various distinctions that makes them stand out, whether it

be the color of their skin, texture of their hair, or shape of their eyes, Zahrah has the additional marker of her hijab. In this way, her racial and religious identities are interconnected.

Other respondents indicated that their racial identity as a MENA person intersected with their religion in different ways than Samira and Zahrah indicated. While these two clearly saw these identities as intertwined and, in Zahrah's case, inseparable, others indicated otherwise. In particular, some noted that the way religion intersects with their race has more to do with the assumptions people make about them, rather than their actual experiences. Azizah, for example, explained the way that religion has shaped the way people see her.

My MENA identity intersects with my religion and gender because at times, people believe that due to my MENA identity, I act [in certain] ways in terms of my religion and gender. Such as people assume my parents are very strict Muslims or don't let me drive or I can't leave without wearing a scarf on my head when I go back to the Middle East. Azizah's answer illuminates the way that stereotypes against Arab women can play out. In her case, she is Muslim. However, her answer implies that the stereotypes about her and her religion are untrue. Even if they were true, they would continue to be stereotypes. Azizah indicates her belief that people assume that her behaviors are because of the intersection of her race, religion, and gender. Additionally, she notes that people makes assumptions about her family life, both in the United States and in the Middle East. The stereotype of women being required to cover their hair in the Middle East and North Africa is in fact quite false. While some countries do require this, such as Iran, most do not.

I asked my respondents what kinds of assumptions people make about them, and if they thought these assumptions were part of a national narrative about MENA people. Many did not

explicitly address the second half of the question, though their answers aligned in many ways. In particular, participants reflected on the various stereotypes about MENA (specifically Arab in many cases), Muslim, women, and the traits that are ascribed to them for holding this identity.

Mehrnoosh points out one important thing about stereotypes – they are often inexplicably contradictory. A familiar example of this is the stereotype that Mexicans are lazy, which directly contradicts that stereotype that Mexicans are taking all of the jobs in the United States away from “legal” citizens (Kondabolu, 2008). Mehrnoosh says that, “People assume that I am smart, disciplined, talented, serious, stubborn, silly, uncommitted, insensitive, too sensitive, pretentious, loaded, naive, wrong”. In this, she outlines the contradictions of people assuming that she is both insensitive and too sensitive; and both disciplined and uncommitted. This contradiction plays out across the answers of all of my respondents. Zahrah believes that people feel she is uneducated and that she can’t speak English; on the contrary, Mehrnoosh believes that people assume she is smart and talented. Zahrah also believes that people assume she is quiet and passive, while Jamila believes that people assume she is angry and loud. This illustrates the contradictory stereotypes that can exist for one group, across the individuals within that group.

Several answers also point to the recurrent trope of being cast as a terrorist. Zahrah points out that people see her as a terrorist and extremely conservative. Jamila names “extremism” as one of the assumptions people make about her. Further, several respondents point to the gendered way these assumptions can play out against women. Many Americans believe that women who wear hijab are extremists; simultaneously, many Americans believe that MENA and Muslim women are oppressed and in need of saving. Houda and Zahrah’s

responses indicates that people assume they are “oppressed”. Azizah similarly notes this, expanding on the idea by writing, “ People assume I am oppressed as a Palestinian-American Muslim woman. The three categories that people feel are oppressed are women, women in Islam and being from (sic) the Middle-East”. One interpretation of the assumption that MENA and Muslim women are oppressed may be the underlying assumption that MENA men are aggressive oppressors who impose a strict regime upon women in their societies. This idea is supported by Azizah’s earlier response in which she indicated that people believe her behavior is further regulated when she travels to the Middle East. It is clear that gender plays some role in these assumptions. However, as my study only included women, it is difficult to know exactly how MENA and Muslim men experience racism and Islamophobia as compared to women.

Additionally, I want to highlight Samira’s response for the important ideas that she brings out. Samira describes the effects of monolithization of MENA people, specifically pointing to pan-Arabism, otherwise known as Arab nationalism as a cause of this. She writes,

As I mentioned before, whenever I tell a non-MENA person that I’m Arab, they automatically assume I’m Muslim. I am Muslim, but conflating those two identities contributes to the idea that MENA, but more specifically the “Arab Diaspora”, is a kind of monolith. It additionally contributes to the idea of Pan-Arab Nationalism which yes is an anti-colonial movement, but one that severely erases cultures, religions, genders, sexualities, etc. that fall outside of that homogenizing proto-nationalist narrative.

“Arab nationalism emerged as a framework for resisting European colonization and intervention in the Arab region” (Naber, 2008, p. 7). Pan-Arabism rose in the 1950s when Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, encouraged its spread (Smith, 2013). Prior to this,

North Africans were not popularly considered Arabs, both by themselves and by others, and were rather identified as individual ethnic groups. Primarily, Egyptians were considered their own ethnic group due to the effect of Pharaonic nationalism, and other North Africans were primarily identified as Berbers/Amazigh, which were the indigenous groups in the region prior to the Islamic conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries. During this time, as Islam spread, so did the Arabic language. While local dialects incorporated elements of Berber languages, as well as Spanish (Morocco), French (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), Italian (Libya), and English (Egypt), Arabic was the core for most regions. As a result of the Pan-Arab nationalist movement, Modern Standard Arabic, based on Qur'anic Arabic, became the official, national language of the newly Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa. This, of course, did not include non-Arab countries of the Middle East such as Turkey, Iran, and the countries of the Caucasus. Samira notes that pan-Arab nationalism also incorporated the idea of Islam as a universal religion across MENA. As she puts it, this process often came at the expense of the many individual ethnic groups, cultures, and religious practices across the region. Samira's answer highlights the complexity of this anti-colonial movement and the effect it has had both in the MENA region and across the world as a tool by which others have monolithized a significant array of peoples.

The other answer I want to highlight is Azizah's. Azizah is one of four Palestinian students who participated in my study. Her answer highlights the political complexity of Palestinian identity in modern times. Azizah notes the complexity of her Palestinian identity, writing, "And, I am not just from anywhere in the Middle-East, but originally from Palestine which many do not understand what that means or what is like". During the Ottoman Empire's

rule of the MENA region, Palestine was part of the province of Greater Syria. When World War I saw the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East was carved up by the British and French. For the first time, Palestine was severed from Syria, and was operated under a British Mandate. Finally, in 1948, the state of Israel was founded, and the occupation of historic Palestine began (Smith, 2013). Simultaneously, 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes in the newly formed state of Israel and thus became refugees. A Palestinian state has never existed independently, which has led some to claim that there is no such thing as Palestinians. Azizah implies that being from Palestine is different from being from other parts of the Middle East. Perhaps it is because, to this day, Palestinians remain a stateless people living under an increasingly harsh occupation by the Israeli government.

As noted in the previous chapter, Intisar is a member of Students for Justice in Palestine at her school, and has been targeted for this work. Two other respondents, Samira and Zahrah, indicated being part of similar organizations at their schools. In Nadine Naber's seminal works, *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* and *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, she noted repeatedly that Palestinian solidarity activism has been an important part of activist efforts for young MENA and Muslim Americans for many years. Of course, Palestine is only one part of the MENA region that has faced negative interference by the West. Iraq, Kuwait, and other countries were targets of multiple wars. The West played a role in creating the regimes in Syria and Lebanon that have led to destabilization and violence. Solidarity with the MENA region has been not only spiritually important for MENA Americans, but also necessary. Azizah's response indicates the

immense difficulty she faces as a Palestinian American; this struggle extends beyond Palestinians, to many MENA and Muslim Americans, as indicated in Naber's works.

Racial-Religious Oppression and Racial Islamophobia

It becomes clearer in reviewing these answers and watching these stories emerge that it is not enough to use a raced-gendered framework to understand the experiences of my respondents. For MENA women, there are clear racial, gendered stereotypes that affect their lived experiences. However, the effect of both perceived and actual religion is too important to ignore. In addition to the responses I have presented in this chapter, Khadijah indicated that an assumption made about her is that she is Muslim, when she does not identify with any religion. I propose two options through which these experiences can be understood. The first is racial Islamophobia; the second is racial-religious oppression. Racial Islamophobia can be understood as one form of racial-religious oppression, but the two are not synonymous.

I define racial-religious oppression as oppression of a group based on their actual or perceived religious beliefs, experienced in conjunction with and explicitly tied to their actual or perceived race. MENA Americans are clear targets of this, as has become clear throughout this chapter. Another group that may experience this are Jews, who have held a racially ambiguous place in American society. While genetic studies have conflicted on the exact percentages, it is clear that the vast majority of Jews across all major ethnic groups (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi) have some amount of Middle East or North African ancestry. Scholars have argued over whether Jewish Americans of European descent have fully assimilated to whiteness or not, and thus their racial position is not clear. A racial-religious oppression analysis may be

appropriate for studying the experiences of Jews, in addition to MENA Americans. In particular, for Mizrahi Jews, a racial-religious framework is particularly interesting for understanding their unique position at the intersection of two categories often pitted against each other in popular discourse. As Salaita (2006) notes, "Certain Mizrahi/Sephardic Jews in the United States also retain an Arab cultural taxonomy, either in addition to or instead of a Jewish identity." (Salaita p. 96)

A racial-religious framework takes as a given that race and religion may be intertwined in a way that makes a singularly focused analysis inadequate. In the case of MENA peoples, a racial-religious analysis acknowledges that the categories of "MENA" and "Muslim" are conflated regularly in society, media, and various representations and depictions of either. That is to say, U.S. society posits Arabness and Muslimness are interchangeable because, to many, they are one in the same. Despite the fact that this is clearly not the case, it affects those that are Arab or Muslim. A racial-religious framework thus also makes understanding the complexity of Mizrahi identity possible, as such a framework is attuned to the fact that, while Arab and Muslim are treated as one and the same, Arab and Jew are treated as polar opposites in a perpetual clash. Thus, race and religion are not the discrete identities that they may appear to be on the surface. For some, they are even more tightly woven together than even an intersectional approach would allow for. For the Arab Americans in Naber's (2012) study, "Islamophobia works as a form of imperial racism and as a mechanism that fuels many young adults' commitment to a distinctly Muslim identity." (p. 134). Like Zahrah, Naber's informants indicated an unseverable connection between their race and religion.

Racial Islamophobia, as a form of racial-religious oppression, does not just affect MENA Americans, and likely does not affect all Muslim Americans. I posit that racial Islamophobia is the unique oppression experienced by both MENA Americans of all faiths and others with brown skin regardless of faith, particularly those of South and Central Asian descent (such as Indians, Pakistanis, Afghanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, etc.). In doing so, I challenge the notion set forth by Steven Salaita (2006) that “anti-Arab racism” and “Islamophobia” refer to the same phenomenon (p. 11). Salaita advanced this position at a time in which anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia had not been significantly studied in depth in the American context. Simultaneously, Salaita was temporally situated only a few years after 9/11, the flashpoint after which discourse around both of these oppressions increased dramatically. I believe it is clear that Islamophobia can be a solely religious oppression, particularly given the fact that most Muslims in the United States are not of MENA descent, and are rather African Americans who suffer from a deeply ingrained system of anti-Black racism throughout the United States; and most Muslims in the world are not of MENA descent, with the greatest number of Muslims living in Southeast Asia. However, I do agree that anti-Arab racism, or rather anti-MENA racism, is greatly tied to Islamophobia. I posit that anti-MENA racism is actually better described as a racial-religious oppression, rather than simply a racial one.

An example of racial Islamophobia is the increase in violence against Sikh men after 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in the following years. These men are racially South Asian and religiously Sikh, but have become targets of racial Islamophobia due to ignorance and stereotypes. In particular, Sikh men who wear turbans are often perceived to “look” Muslim even though Muslim men do not actually wear turbans. This stereotype is rooted in images of

Ottoman sultans (who many times did wear turbans) and Bedouin men who wear kuffiyehs wrapped around their head (despite the fact that kuffiyehs are cultural, rather than religious symbols). Sikh men are thus targeted due to their appearance in a way that is a classical form of racism based on phenotype; however, the motivating factor behind assessing phenotype for these violent purposes is a hatred for the Islamic religion, rather than an outright aim of oppressing MENA people. A racial-religious framework would note that Sikhs are an ethnoreligious community and that their identities are inseparable. A racial Islamophobia approach would specifically cite the ways that Sikh men have become oppressed by stereotypes of and hatred for Muslims that then makes them a target based on their skin color and other aspects of their appearance.

It is very important to make clear that MENA people come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. The three major monotheistic, Abrahamic religions all began in the Middle East. As such, people of all three backgrounds have always lived there. Mizrahi Jews were often called Arab Jews or Oriental Jews prior to the founding of the state of Israel. As noted above, some Mizrahi Jews maintain an Arab identification, so this term can sometimes be appropriate. However, the term “Oriental” Jews is, of course, based in Orientalism, and thus should fall out of usage. Mizrahi Jews are indigenous to many places across the MENA region, including Iran, Armenia, Palestine, and Morocco, to name just a few. They are sometimes referred to as Jews who “never left the Middle East”, further inscribing their indigeneity and racial identity as MENA people. Additionally, there have been sizeable Christian minorities throughout the MENA region, including Maronite Catholics in Lebanon and other Levantine nations, and Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt. French colonialism and influence in Lebanon

was originally conducted on the basis of “protecting” the Christian minority there (Smith, 2013). Beyond these groups, non-monotheistic religions have also had a significant place in the MENA region, including Baha’i people and Zoroastrianism, which was the original religion in Iran before the spread of Islam, and still remains an important part in some Persians’ identities (Tehrani, 2009). It is only a stereotype that the MENA region is exclusively Muslim, and is based in Orientalist thought. This feeds racial Islamophobia.

Though I did not have any men in my respondent group, literature suggests that men experience racial Islamophobia in ways that are different from women. My analysis suggests that women are both treated as suspects of terrorism and damsels in need of saving by the Western (White) world. On the other hand, research suggests that men are treated as violent terrorist threats that are also more patriarchal and otherwise conservative than (White) men in the Western world. Naber (2008) describes Islamophobia as “...a form of cultural racism that essentializes Muslimness as if the association between violence against women and Muslim masculinity is natural and insurmountable constitutes the articulation of Muslim masculinity as intrinsically connected to misogynist savagery” (p. 293). Though Naber, unlike Salaita, does not make specific claims regarding anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, she does suggest the link between the two. This supports my position that anti-MENA racism is actually a racial-religious oppression, while simultaneously illustrating some of the possible effects of racial Islamophobia.

That said, it is important to remember that men and women, as well as MENA Americans of all genders, experience racial Islamophobia. A raced-religious approach allows this unique oppression to be understood, catalogued, and studied through research. Analyses

exclusively reliant on racial or religious frameworks fail to adequately address the experiences of MENA Americans. This is especially salient in the fact that my respondents had answers ranging from their racial and religious identities being tied, to being inseparable, to being unrelated but assumed of them. A racial-religious approach that specifically addresses racial Islamophobia allows their stories to be more fully understood. Such a racial-religious approach also acknowledges that anti-MENA racism is in fact both a racial and religious form of oppression. In summary, MENA Americans all experience a racial-religious oppression through anti-MENA oppression; racial Islamophobia, on the other hand, does not just affect MENA Americans, and additionally targets those perceived to be Muslim based on their skin color and other aspects of their appearance. Even “Some Latinos have suffered because they look Middle Eastern”, according to Tehranian (2009, p. 163). Though, South Asian Americans remain the primary target of racial Islamophobia outside of MENA Americans.

Chapter 6: The Way Forward

MENA American women in predominantly white colleges and universities face unique challenges and experiences. My research has shown a variety of themes that have emerged from their stories. In the fourth chapter, I illuminated the unique microaggressive experiences that many of the women in study have experienced, particularly as they related to experiences of racial isolation. This highlighted the extreme underrepresentation of MENA American women in various spaces in colleges and universities. Across all categories of social space, my respondents reported being the only MENA person in the room frequently and, along the same lines, feeling as if they had to speak for all MENA people in these spaces.

Though my respondents overall reported low levels of experience with violence in any of the spaces I asked about in my survey, this experience was not universal. One respondent in particular detailed the ways she has experienced microaggressions and other forms of violence throughout her social life. Though others may have given these questions low ratings, indicating infrequent experiences with these acts of aggression, their free-response answers included numerous experiences of microaggressions or, as Samira described it, cultural imperialism. This cultural imperialism, framed by Orientalism, has surrounded many of the experiences my respondents reported.

In the fifth chapter, I described the ways in which my respondents' identities as MENA Americans, specifically MENA American women, intersected with their religious identities. Though my respondents had varying religious beliefs, including Islam, Baha'i, and no affiliation at all, the vast majority of them experienced additional microaggressions based on assumptions about their religious identity. These microaggressions were often based in assumptions about

the MENA region, Islam, and women at the intersection of both of these categories. It is clear that assumptions have shaped my respondents' experiences largely and in a multitude of ways, in particular as their identities intersect with both their actual and perceived religious backgrounds.

Throughout both chapters of analysis, it became clear that stereotypes have certainly had direct effects on the lives of my respondents. I posit that these stereotypes are part of a national narrative concerning MENA Americans. This national narrative positions MENA Americans as foreigners, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States. Additionally, it constructs them as extremists, extremely conservative, and likely to perpetuate acts of terror in the United States and the West in general. In particular, women face the added narrative of being incredibly oppressed and forced to abide by the will of their male relatives and other MENA men who contribute to an aggressive, pervasive patriarchy. On top of all of this, MENA Americans face erasure of their specific identities, including their ethnicity, national origin, and religion. Beyond this, they are denied any sort of political diversity, as the national narrative uniformly positions them as conservative extremists.

Such a national narrative partially derives from issues of representation. While MENA people have existed in the various realms of American society for a long time, popular representation has been lacking. Despite 40% of the Beverly Hills teenage population being Persian, *Beverly Hills 90210* contains only one Middle Eastern character in its 296 episodes, who is only coded as such by his Armenian surname (Tehrani, 2009, p. 99). MENA Americans are commonly miscoded in this way; if they are "good" Americans, they are coded as White, as in the cases of tennis player Andre Agassi (Armenian), former Apple CEO Steve Jobs (Syrian), and

former presidential candidate Ralph Nader (Lebanese). Even singer Shakira (Lebanese) and actress Salma Hayek (Lebanese), though treated as people of color in their Latina identities, are not seen as Middle Eastern (p. 74). Though Hayek is an actress, it is unlikely that she would ever play a MENA character. “Hollywood does not typically feature Middle Easterners in starring roles. When they do appear onscreen, the men are typically portrayed as wife beaters, religious zealots, and terrorists. Meanwhile, the women are often represented as cowering, weak, and oppressed” (p. 92). Such negative representations undeniably feed into the conditions that produce the microaggressions experienced by my respondents.

Based on the strong ties between my respondents’ racial and religious identities, I developed two new frameworks by which the MENA American experience can be better understood, beyond critical race theory, raced-gendered epistemologies, or other critical frameworks that seek to value and highlight the experiences of people of color in the United States. The overarching approach, which I have termed the racial-religious framework, acknowledges the unique intersection of race and religion experienced by specific groups. This type of approach is applicable to many groups, including ethno-religious groups such as Jews, Sikhs, and Druze. These groups all hold a unique position as their religion is not simply a set of beliefs, and is heavily tied to lineage or a specific, localized ethnic group.

Building upon this, I developed the idea of racial Islamophobia, which affects a wide swath of people regardless of their race or religion. In particular, racial Islamophobia affects all MENA Americans regardless of their religion, and affects many non-MENA Americans, particularly those with brown skin and of South and Central Asian descent. Racial Islamophobia is based strongly in Orientalism and cultural imperialism, which posits Islam as a foreign force,

completely at odds with the Western world. “Indeed, there is the implication that Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are more closely affiliated with Arab or Muslim countries in general, regardless of their specific ancestry, than they are to the United States” (Joseph and D’Harlingue, 2008, p. 240). Furthermore, Orientalism, and by extension, racial Islamophobia, predicates cultural imperialism against both MENA Americans and the MENA region itself. As a racial-religious framework, racial Islamophobia allows understanding of the MENA American experience at the intersection of their unique racial position and the widely held American belief that Islam is the sole religion of the MENA region, and the cause of worldwide terror.

I have not, until this point, specifically addressed the question of how MENA Americans should be classified in the American racial project. As noted in the fourth chapter, the majority of my respondents identified solely as Middle Eastern and/or North African, and it is unclear if the remaining respondents identified as multiracial or if they had some other relationship to their racial identity. Based on this, it is clear that the classification of MENA Americans as White is insufficient and problematic. Further, it is clear that MENA Americans do not experience Whiteness or hold White privilege. Cheryl Harris details the power of Whiteness as a form of property in the United States; it is clear that MENA Americans do not take part in this metaphorical property ownership. Additionally,

To be unmarked, or to be marked as “white”, implies that full rights and protections and citizenship are securely possessed by you, that you must be treated as an individual, that your actions do not reflect the status of others in your group, and that the status of your group does not determine how you should be treated as an individual (Shryock, 2008, p. 105-106).

Based on the role of stereotypes in constructing a national narrative about MENA people in the United States, it is clear that a White racial identity for MENA Americans is laughable at best.

Cainkar (2008) built on Shrock's sentiment:

Hitler, Mussolini, and their agents are portrayed as deviants and outliers, not reflections on white, European, or Christian culture. But the violent act of any Arab or Muslim is rendered to represent entire societies and cultures and is portrayed as a mechanical, civilizational act (p.51).

MENA Americans are often defined by the actions of a few, such as Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. On the contrary, German and Italian Americans are not similarly defined by hateful, oppressive leaders of their ethnicity.

Beyond this, I specifically asked respondents if they felt solidarity with Black, Latino, and other groups of color when national issues occurred relating to their racial group. No one answered no to this. Ten of my respondents explicitly answered yes, elaborating in a variety of ways; one did not respond at all (and did not respond to any of the free-response questions), and one spoke about the difficulty associated with solidarity in general on her campus. The nearly universal response to this question further suggests that MENA Americans cannot accurately be classified as White. While it is obvious that true solidarity work requires more than simply answering yes to this type of question, the enthusiasm with which my respondents answered, as well as examples they gave, point to a true basis to this solidarity that goes beyond simply saying so.

Several respondents explicitly contrasted their experiences as people of color with the experiences of their White peers. Zahrah gives the most direct response, writing, "My

experience has been much more similar to other students of color than to white students”.

Noor’s thoughts add to this, as she discusses related to experiences of nation-based racism and color-based racism:

Though each minority has different histories in the US and faces different issues, all our issues stem from the same thing. White Americans feel as though they can lay a claim on this land and fear change and fear what is different. When people are unfairly treated because of the color of their skin or where they or their parents are born, it is an issue that I can understand.

Noor’s response also includes a reference to the histories of people of color in the United States. Jamila also describes these histories, noting “The issues are different, the histories are different, the representation is different, but the oppressive animosity by the white majority is the same [among people of color]”. Fatima similarly notes that Black, Latinx, and other non-MENA people of color in the United States “have an even longer history and consistency in dealing with oppression and race-representation”. Each of these responses has specifically pointed out the oppression that White people inflict upon people of color in the context of these histories. In fact, Samira explicitly states that “[I]t is important to stand in solidarity with other students of color against the prevailing racist system that profits from our exclusion”. Samira’s response draws together the histories of oppression among all people of color in the United States with their modern-day effects.

It is clear from these responses that my respondents identify as people of color. This, combined with the clear racism they have faced, as I have illustrated, means that they are people of color. Though anti-MENA racism can look different from other, more familiar forms of

racism in the United States, it is exceedingly prevalent, and in fact shares much in common with other forms of racism. “The features of anti-Arab racism are comparable, if not identical, to the features of racism directed at Black, Indian, and Hispanic students. The features are indeed analogous, because they arise from the same contexts of misinformation, colonial discourse, and hyperpatriotic chauvinism...” (Salaita, 2006, p. 123). For example, like Black men, MENA men are cast as violent, and like both Black and Latino men, MENA men are cast as misogynistic, queerphobic, and otherwise opposed to various progressive ideas. Like Asian women, MENA women are cast as subservient, quiet, and otherwise passive. Furthermore, like other people of color, MENA Americans fear White spaces. Cainkar (2008) described:

A large number of women interviewed, *muhajibaat* or not, report feeling afraid for their safety in certain types of public places. These places were almost always connected to whiteness. That is, while some men and women said they feel unsafe *as individuals* in neighborhoods associated with criminal activity, those who felt unsafe *as Arabs or Muslims* felt that way only in all-white or dominantly white areas (p. 77, emphasis in original).

Referring to women who wear *hijab* to cover their hair, Cainkar additionally noted the racial-religious nature of anti-MENA racism.

One of the key differences in the racism experienced by MENA Americans and that of other groups is the issue of representation. Because MENA Americans are legally classified as White, it is much harder to achieve adequate levels of and accuracy in representation. “Reified as the other, Americans of Middle Eastern descent do not enjoy the benefits of white privilege. Yet, as white under the law, they are denied the fruits of remedial action” (Tehrani, 2009, p.

3). While affirmative action policies can assist with remedying historical injustices against Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American peoples, MENA people are left out of this due to their status as White. As one respondent noted in the fourth chapter, the Arab student organization at her college was completely excluded from plans for a multicultural center, despite other groups of color being invited to participate in this planning process. In this way, the racism experienced by MENA Americans is especially dangerous, because it has the ability to completely go unnoticed and unremedied. For example, in 1978, professor Majid Ghaidan Al-Khazaraji attempted to sue for denial of tenure on racial grounds, but it was ruled that he was the same race as his supervisors (p. 157). This is unacceptable.

Another aspect of anti-MENA racism is the reliance on diasporic experiences. Naber (2012) described the idea of Arab American diaspora as follows:

Articulations of Arabness are best understood through the concept of diaspora. Seen through the lens of diaspora, 'cultural identity is hyphenated wherein the hyphen does not mark a simple duality between two distinct cultural heritages'. The hyphen between the categories of 'Arab' and 'American' 'emphasizes the multiple local and global conditions that shape identity' and happens when different narratives of nations, classes, genders, generations, sexualities, and so on collide with one another as 'interstices' or 'third-space' (p. 27).

MENA people living in diaspora in the United States have often incorporated activism into their identities. As noted in the fifth chapter, Palestinian solidarity work has been one major way that MENA Americans have engaged in anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-war activism from the diaspora. Scholars agree that the 1967 Arab-Israeli war was a "watershed" for Arab Americans

(Naber, 2008, p. 7). “The 1967 war marked the U.S. state’s confirmed alliance with Israel as well as an intensification of U.S. military, political, and economic intervention in the Arab region, anti-Arab media representation, and anti-Arab discrimination and harassment within the United States” (p. 32). As the U.S. government began to focus on aiding Israel in a fight against Arab forces, and anti-MENA racism began to flourish in both policy and society. Naber described this further:

Acts of harassment and intimidation against Arab and Arab American activists who participated in antiwar and/or Palestine solidarity movements exemplify the ways in which the targeting of activists who were perceived to be Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim was influenced by an interplay between cultural and nation-based racism. This interplay sets the stage for incidents of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism coupled with political repression (p.299).

An example of this is found through President Nixon’s Operation Boulder, a series FBI policies and surveillance programs that targeted Arab Americans, particular students, due to “possible connections” to “terrorist activities” in Palestine and Israel (p. 34). In this climate, it makes sense that Arab Americans began to coalesce in new ways. Ghazal Read (2008) noted that for the first time, Christian and Muslim Arab Americans began to unite over their common ethnicity by creating national organizations, in order to advance their common interests (p. 308).

Naber noted that this activism has extended to opposing various U.S.-led wars in the MENA region as well. The incorporation of this type of activism into the MENA American identity has increased disciplinary and policing methods against this group. On college campuses, groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine and other similar organizations have

been made the targets of administrations, pro-Israel watch groups, and, in the case of my own institution, wealthy alumnae/i threatening to pull financial support. Palestine is often used a rhetorical tool to enjoin the U.S. and Israel, as in a 2002 piece that likens the PLO to Osama bin Laden, and American supporters of Palestine terrorists, particularly Arab American supporters (D'Harlingue and Joseph, 2008, p. 260). The official racial position of MENA Americans had allowed those in power to discriminate against and target them with little repercussions.

Racial Islamophobia is key to understanding the position of MENA people in American society. This specific oppression constructs an archetypal terrorist that is then utilized by disciplinary forces to take action against MENA Americans, whether these forces are airport security, college administrations, or the police. The construction of the terrorist allows the state to label MENA people security threats, and thus justifies any number of actions taken against them. Israel engages in similar practices against not only MENA people, but people of color in general. A Black American scholar recently published a piece describing his incarceration by Israeli police on the grounds that he was a "security threat" (Bailey, 2016). He had been on his way to present at a conference at Birzeit University in the West Bank about the solidarity between Black Lives Matter activists and Palestinians, but he never made it due to his incarceration. Following 9/11, the United States government arbitrarily imprisoned and questioned MENA and Muslim people, particularly men on the basis of their supposed threat to national security. It seems that allies think alike.

I am thankful that none of my respondents reported such extreme experiences, or any experiences at all with incarceration. However, this does not change the fact that such an action taken against them is always a possibility. Much like the genuine fear that many Black

Americans have of the police force, MENA Americans can reasonably fear their own incarceration due to contrived and unsubstantiated allegations of threat to national security. Or, if Donald Trump is elected president, MENA Americans can and should reasonably fear deportation, or the inability to return to the United States if they leave. In the post 9/11 world, the American climate is incredibly hostile to this group.

Moving forward, it is imperative the MENA Americans are, first of all, officially recognized as a racial group. A MENA category would allow for recognition of the ways MENA Americans can contribute to diversity; right now it cannot be determined how much discrimination they suffer due to their categorization as White (Tehrani, 2009, p. 172). Additionally, “the growing rift between ‘Arab’ and ‘white’ identities is the central problem the racialization vocabulary allows us to talk about” (Shryock, 2008, p. 99). By recognizing MENA Americans, we can talk about their situation and find ways to remedy it. “Unlike many other groups, Middle Eastern Americans appear to be suffering from growing rates of discrimination, both in the private sphere and through government policies” (Tehrani, 2009, p. 114). In higher education in particular, colleges and universities must actively seek to support and include MENA students in admissions, extracurricular activities, and support structures such as advisors, directors, and so forth. At this moment, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for MENA American students to find their place in predominantly White institutions that do not value them or their experiences.

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Appendix 1: The Survey Instrument

Page 1: Demographic Information

What is your age?

What year are you in at college/university?

- a) First year
- b) Second year
- c) Third year
- d) Fourth year
- e) Fifth year or beyond

What is your gender?

- a) Man
- b) Woman
- c) Other:

How do you identify racially or ethnically? Check all that apply.

- a) White
- b) Black or African American
- c) Asian
- d) Pacific Islander
- e) Native American
- f) Latin American
- g) Middle Eastern or North African
- h) Other:

If you identify as Middle Eastern or North African, do you identify with any of these groups?

- a) Arab
- b) Iranian/Persian
- c) Turkish
- d) Berber/Amazigh
- e) Other:

If you identify as Middle Eastern or North African, with which country of origin do you identify?

Check all that apply.

- a) Algeria
- b) Armenia
- c) Azerbaijan
- d) Bahrain
- e) Egypt
- f) Georgia
- g) Iran
- h) Iraq
- i) Israel
- j) Jordan
- k) Kuwait
- l) Lebanon
- m) Libya
- n) Mauritania

- o) Morocco
- p) Oman
- q) Palestine
- r) Qatar
- s) Saudi Arabia
- t) Sudan
- u) Syria
- v) Tunisia
- w) Turkey
- x) United Arab Emirates
- y) Yemen
- z) Other:

How do you religiously identify?

- a) Buddhist
- b) Christian
- c) Hindu
- d) Jewish
- e) Muslim
- f) No affiliation
- g) Other:

What is your immigrant/generational status?

- a) First-generation (I moved to the United States at some point in my life)

- b) Second generation (My parent(s) moved to the United States and I was born here)
- c) Third generation or beyond
- d) Other:

If you are a first generation immigrant, at what age did you move to the United States?

What is your major or focus of study?

- a) Natural sciences and mathematics
- b) Social sciences
- c) Arts
- d) Foreign language/literature/culture
- e) Other:

What college do you attend?

Page 2: Extracurricular Activities

The next set of questions will ask you about extracurricular activities. This includes clubs and organizations you are part of. This does not include work, internships, volunteering, etc.

Please list the clubs and organizations that you have been part of.

Have you been only MENA person in a room in your extracurricular activities?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you felt like you had to represent all MENA people in your extracurricular activities?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you been called a derogatory name due to your MENA identity in your extracurricular activities?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced violence due to your MENA identity in your extracurricular activities?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced microaggressions due to your MENA identity in your extracurricular activities?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Has your MENA identity been conflated with some other aspect of your identity in your extracurricular activities? Check all that apply.

- a) Yes, my gender
- b) Yes, my religion
- c) Yes, my sexual orientation
- d) Yes, my socioeconomic status
- e) No
- f) Other

Page 3: Work Experience

The next set of questions will ask you about work. This includes formal employment in jobs, internships, and volunteering.

Please list the works experiences that you have been part of.

Have you been only MENA person in a room in your work experience?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you felt like you had to represent all MENA people in your work experience

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you been called a derogatory name due to your MENA identity in your work experience?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced violence due to your MENA identity in your work experience?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced microaggressions due to your MENA identity in your work experience?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Has your MENA identity been conflated with some other aspect of your identity in your work experience? Check all that apply.

- a) Yes, my gender
- b) Yes, my religion
- c) Yes, my sexual orientation
- d) Yes, my socioeconomic status
- e) No
- f) Other

Page 4: Social scene

The next set of questions will ask you about social scene. This includes parties, events you have attended, and related categories that fall outside of extracurricular activities and work experience.

Please list the social scenes that you have been part of.

Have you been only MENA person in a room in your social scene?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you felt like you had to represent all MENA people in your social scene?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you been called a derogatory name due to your MENA identity in your social scene ?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced violence due to your MENA identity in your social scene?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Have you experienced microaggressions due to your MENA identity in your social scene?

1-10 scale (Never to Always)

Has your MENA identity been conflated with some other aspect of your identity in your social scene? Check all that apply.

- a) Yes, my gender
- b) Yes, my religion
- c) Yes, my sexual orientation
- d) Yes, my socioeconomic status
- e) No
- f) Other
- g) What is your age?

Page 5: Free Response

These questions will give you an opportunity to share your experiences around your MENA identity.

What kinds of microaggressions, derogatory name-calling, or violence have your experience in social spaces (extracurricular, work-related, or social scene) in college?

How has your identity as a MENA person changed or evolved during your college career?

Do you feel solidarity with Black, Latino, and other students of color when national issues occur related to these groups? Why or why not?

How do you think the events of September 11th, 2001 changed the way MENA Americans are perceived?

How does your MENA identity intersect with other parts of your identity?

What assumptions do people make about you? Do you believe these assumptions relate to a national narrative about MENA people?