UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Towards a Psychology of Possibility-Making: Arab American Muslim Youth Practicing Legibility, Refusal, and Revolutionary Optimism

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/564295wh

Author
Yassine, Asil A

Publication Date
2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Towards a Psychology of Possibility-Making:

Arab American Muslim Youth Practicing Legibility, Refusal, and Revolutionary Optimism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Asil Ali Yassine

2024

© Copyright by

Asil Ali Yassine

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Towards a Psychology of Possibility-Making:

Arab American Muslim Youth Practicing Legibility, Refusal, and Revolutionary Optimism

by

Asil Ali Yassine

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Rashmita S. Mistry, Chair

Arab American Muslim youth are working to create possibilities for themselves in a world structured by interlocked systems of domination and control. Much literature has documented the ways these systems have constrained this population (see Amer & Awad, 2016) but there is a need to explore the ways in which young Arab American Muslims are active agents in their lives. Additionally, these youth may approach their own development through the tenets of Islam, which propose that human development is about refining the soul by striving towards justice in relationship with others. This qualitative study involved fifteen participants in conversations over the span of nearly ten months that resulted in a conclusion that young people are creating possibilities through legibility, refusal, and revolutionary optimism. Future studies can further interrogate how young people choose these options for possibility and probe further into how Islam guides their pursuit of possibilities.

The dissertation of Asil Ali Yassine is approved.

Sandra H. Graham

Ananda Maria Marin

Loubna N. Qutami

Rashmita S. Mistry, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Table of Contents **iv**
Acknowledgments **vi**
VITA **viii**
Prologue **1**
Introduction **4**
Islam and possibility-making 5
Tawakkul 6
Jihad 7
Grounding and Literature Review **8**
Historical Background of Arab and Muslim Americans in the U.S. 11
Being-Becoming 13
Developmental Theories 14
Interdisciplinary Perspectives 25
Islamic Psychology 31
Belonging 33
Developmental theories 33
Interdisciplinary perspectives 34
Islamic psychology 36
Current Study **37**
Positionality Statement **38**
Methods **39**
An Islamic paradigmatic approach to research 39
Person-centered interviewing 41
Procedures 43
Participants 43
Data Analysis Process 47
Phenomena from a qualitative research study 49
Hesitations around vocabulary 50
An anti-policing interview stance 51
A shift in October 52
Results **53**
Rendering legibility 53
Concealing 54
Shape-shifting 61
Refusal 66

Refusal of performance 66
Refusal of epistemic disciplining and dilution 70
Refusal of intimidation 73
Revolutionary optimism 75
Tawakkul as the foundation for revolutionary optimism 75
Personal jihad 79
Discussion and Future Steps 84
Concluding Thoughts 91
Appendix A — Participants 93
Appendix B — Methods 95
References 100

Acknowledgments

It takes a village and I fear there is not enough room on these pages to name this village. This is my humble attempt at illustrating who has held me for the last several months and years.

Thank you first and foremost to my advisor and chair, Rashmita, who has patiently sat through an infinite number of iterations of these ideas from the very beginning. Most touching to me is not only your commitment to me but your faith that this would all come together. Every conversation with you feels like a breath of fresh air — I really could not have asked for more from an advisor and friend. Sandra, thank you for your immense clarity on all the processes that our youth engage in. Your scholarship and writing is invaluable to me and others — many of my first thoughts came from pouring over your words. Ananda, I remember lingering on every word and question you posed during our class in the days of Zoom University of 2020-2021. It was the first time in my schooling that I had felt like my epistemology and the rumblings of my heart were understood. Just as invaluable was that cup of coffee we had earlier this year as I was navigating an ever-intensifying university campus. Loubna, I cherish you. You are such an incredible asset to our worlds at UCLA. You taught me how to hold intellectual complexity without compromising moral and ethical clarity — something that I was thirsty for many years.

To the Mistry RAC, thank you for seeing me through five years of this journey — both on and off campus. You all are the best humans. The space and snacks and solidarity means the world to me. Chris and Nour, thank you for the many words of encouragement and snacks and celebratory moments that helped me through this final push. To the beautiful undergraduate and graduate students who are fighting for the liberation of Palestine on our campus, I love you dearly. Thank you for being the best team in my journey as a scholar-activist. I so appreciate you seeing me as both an activist and someone who desperately needed to duck away to the library

for a few hours to write. I will never forget the moments we spent together at our encampment — the painful and the beautiful ones. I hope our next camping experience will be in liberated Palestine, where we can be merry together.

To Nadeen and Abe, you make me laugh and humble me greatly. I think that's what siblings are supposed to do. Baby, I love you, my furry friend. You sat next to my laptop patiently awaiting a few pets in between paragraphs and greatly eased my nervous system. To the 64 Pleasant Street crew, y'all are my day ones. The questions I had for this study came out of our many conversations in our beautiful, turquoise living room. Being in Cambridge were some of the best three years of my life because of you.

I can't write about my parents without crying. I love you, mama and baba. You're the reason for everything. My first teachers, the chests I lay upon when the world is too much. Thank you, teta and jeddo in Michigan for your warmth, stories, celebrations, and food. You are my connection to Palestine thousands of miles away. Thank you, teta and jeddo in another realm, for showing me where I came from in Lebanon. I yearn to meet you again someday, fry some eggs, and drink black tea in your garden.

I owe my gratitude to a higher power I call God, who is the life force from which my existence came from. I will never understand everything about You, but I have great admiration for You and all the ways in which You are manifest. One of the ways You make yourself known is through the deepest love I have ever known. Thank you, Julien, for being exactly who you are. You are my Juju, my booboo, the human who I feel most at home with. I love you.

To those creating possibilities in Palestine and on any land resisting occupation, this is for you. Thank you for teaching me so much.

VITA

Academic Degrees

2017	Ed.M. in Education Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts
2012	B.A. in Political Science and Economics Austin College Sherman, Texas

Academic Positions

2021-2024	Teaching Associate Department of Education University of California, Los Angeles Los Angeles, California
2020-2022	Graduate Student Researcher Department of Education University of California, Los Angeles Los Angeles, California
2017-2019	Teaching Fellow Graduate School of Education Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts

Awards and Certificates

2023-2024	Dissertation Year Fellowship (UCLA)
2022-2023	Graduate Research Mentorship Award (UCLA)
2020	Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Award (UCLA)
2019-2021	Gordon and Olga Smith Fellowship (UCLA)
2017	Language and Literacy Intellectual Contribution Award (Harvard)

2016 Dean's Scholarship (Harvard)

2012 Magna Cum Laude (Austin College)

2012 Honors in Economics (Austin College)

Publications

Yassine, A. (2023). Symposium: Fugitivity, Self Theorization, and Emerging Agency Amongst Young Arab American Muslims in the U.S.. AMENA-Psy 2023 Conference, September 30, 2023.

Mistry, R.S., **Yassine, A.** (2022). "I feel like some people work twice as hard to get half as much." OPRE Report 2022-127.

Mistry, R. S., Elenbaas, L., Griffin, K., Nenadal, L., **Yassine, A.** (2021). Advancing developmental intergroup perspectives on social class. *Child Development Perspectives*.

Mistry, R. S., Strassberger, M., **Yassine, A.**, Metz, R., Avila, O. (2021). *Understanding Poverty: Final Report.* MDRC. Report submission in preparation for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

Popielarz, K., **Yassine, A.,** and Rosenbaum, S. (in progress). *Participatory filmmaking as a tool for educational change: Lessons from Detroit.*

Yassine, A. (2017). How we fight for public education now. *The Huffington Post.* https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-we-fight-for-public-education-now_us_589cd75ce4b02bbb1816c45f

Yassine, A. (2017). *Literacy: The Great American Theft.* TEDx Talk at Austin College, Sherman, Texas.

Yassine, A. (2017). *Intersectionality and Multiple Identities.* Invited panelist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education Alumni of Color Conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Prologue

Having nearly a year of both formal and informal conversations with participants allowed for a unique opportunity: to walk and witness people's journeys over time. The gift of time not only deepened my relationship with my thoughtful and incredible research participants but also made it possible for us to reflect on the past, present, and future together in a way that was less abstract. Transcripts were riddled with phrases such as "Remember back in September…" or "By the time I see you next, I would have…." Utterings from the first conversation could be revisited in the third. Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza began in early October during the second round of conversations and penetrated every subsequent conversation. Participants had breakups, moves, and changes in their jobs. Because participants and I were traversing space and time together, I had a front-row seat to what is defining this research: participants creating possibilities.

I returned to the original intention of this project, which was to document how young Arab American Muslim youth think about who they are. Who they are, I observed, are a group of people creating possibilities for themselves within immense, interlocking systems of power created to dominate and control. These systems are a conglomerate of what bell hooks calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy." Interpersonal issues, too, are born of this system. While it would be easy for me to spend much of this study naming these systems and identifying the ways they have harmed Arab American Muslim youth, many scholars have already long documented this. Instead, I choose to focus on possibility-making as an expression of these young people wrestling with hegemonic power. In particular, I argue that we can observe how possibility is created by understanding how young people practice legibility, refusal, and revolutionary optimism.

The term “life-affirming” is exactly as it sounds — something that affirms, validates, and holds life and livelihood. Looking at this through the lens of Islam, life itself is a journey towards freedom. This is not the freedom to chase desires, but rather the opposite — freedom from all material and psychic investments that clamp on an innate divine state of the human. In Islam, this innate state is called fitrah and it points towards a complete form of Love. Ultimate peace is found here. The journey of a human, a Muslim would say, is the journey to connect to this innate, divine state by way of striving to be in a just, loving relationship with all of creation.

Cornel West reminds us that justice is what love looks like in public. I wrote much of this dissertation in a very public sphere — a good third of this was written inside or adjacent to a tent I set up at the UCLA encampment with hundreds of other students, faculty, and staff demanding the university divest from the war industry. Before the police destroyed the encampment and brutalized and arrested us, my heart swelled each day witnessing kin also pursuing a just cause. It felt like an uncanny gift to pour over these participants’ words — as tired as I was at the end of these long days — for their language captured so much of what I was ruminating on at the time. Human development can be a development *towards* love and justice, if we choose to have absolute clarity about how power operates and commit to disrupting these structures. I am so honored to be in conversation with fifteen young people who were demonstrating what it meant to navigate this while retaining a deep conviction that *none of this has to be this way.* The little time we had together was life-affirming, clarifying, and invigorating for me.

The backlash we continue to receive practicing love in public is only a fraction of what Palestinians and all colonized people endure as they affirm life. As I wrote, I returned often to this quote from bell hooks: “I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their

experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys" (hooks, 1994, p. 74). This is a humble offering that builds off of the words we have been gifted by those who courageously speak.

Introduction

Within systems of domination and control, young people must create possibilities for themselves. These possibilities are not just about navigating what bell hooks calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy", but also in responding to them and creating life in spite of them. Arab American Muslim youth are a population that have historically been the target of overwhelming anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism in the U.S. While this still holds, understanding this population as a group that has *agency* and also as a group with a *variety of experiences* shaped by family, culture, gender, sexuality, ability, and class can be fruitful in seeing them as more holistic humans. It is time to understand this group not just as the victims of systemic forces but also as a group with agency to decide what possibilities they want to create for themselves.

This study approaches this population with great interest in who they are as agentic beings who have a relationship to a spirituality that provides guidance on how to be in relationship with all creation. Islam is generally not a lens that is adopted in developmental science to understand young peoples' experiences, but with this population it proves to be insightful. Islam teaches that humans are spiritual beings who are called to live an Earthly life that is in service to God, with the main work being refining the soul to pursue the highest forms of love and justice. When looked through this lens, young people who subscribe to some version of Islam see themselves as individuals who are called to improve the state of their soul. In Islam, this is possible by paying close attention to the combined heart-mind faculty, where all intellect, consciousness, and emotions emerge. When studying how young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities for themselves, then, it necessitates stepping back and looking at the larger picture of Muslims who are attempting a higher calling rather than just pursuing material desires.

In other words, creating possibilities through an Islamic framework is not just about the question of "What feels good for me?" but rather "What could I be called to do that will refine my soul?"

Interviews with fifteen Arab American Muslim youth revealed that they are creating possibilities through legibility, refusal, and revolutionary optimism. These acts are not phases of a linear process of possibility-making but rather creative options that this population employs depending on the context and their own comfort. The purpose of this study is to begin to probe into possibility-making with the hopes that these initial findings may lead to a more robust theory about how young people create possibilities that lead to worlds outside of the one that attempts to constrain, silence, and control them. One space of guidance young Arab American Muslims may turn to is Islam itself. Below, I share some tenets of Islamic theology that are relevant to a discussion about how youth *develop* into humans creating possibilities for themselves.

Islam and possibility-making

Developmental psychologists in the Global North have studied related fields like moral development or social development. However, little literature has looked at development through the lens of Islam, where the development of the soul on Earth is arguably the most critical work a Muslim can do — not out of fear or preparation for an afterlife, but rather as a way to find peace, pursue justice, honor the land, and improve the state of the collective. Rothman and Coyle (2018) introduced an Islamic model of the soul that integrated various modes of Islamic thought, particularly on the development of the soul. They reiterate that many scholars he interviewed "view the purpose of human life as an opportunity to purify the soul and many described it as a project of development: to uncover the *fitrah* [original divine state] inside of purifying the *nafs* [soul]" (p. 1737). As one of their participant-scholars put it: "It's a more complete existence. It's

not focused on just getting people back into the capitalist system for instance, and just defining human functioning as being productive in the material sense" (p. 1737). An approach to development through the lens of Islam would invite attunement into how participants' developmental experiences shape who they are as soul-bearing people who have a higher calling — to improve their spiritual state in a way that affirms life. Thus, possibility-making is seen not just as participants' attempts at following their desires but rather them building life-affirming pathways for themselves.

Islam clearly articulates beliefs about the human condition and the material world, with a particular focus on how Muslims should respond to oppression: oppression in the general world, violence inflicted upon them, oppression they may unintentionally subject others to, and ways we may oppress ourselves. Part of the belief system includes an idea that justice is both something to strive for and also ultimately will be bestowed by God in the afterlife. These beliefs are part of Arab American Muslims' possibility-making as it offers a perspective on how to view oppression, which was referenced by every participant. Two ideas came forth from the idea that will be explored later in this study's results but will be briefly described here: tawakkul (trust) and jihad (struggle). I will briefly describe these definitions here.

Tawakkul

Tawakkul translates to "trust", and in the Islamic space specifically refers to a trust in God, that one will never be abandoned, that a divine plan accompanies our efforts and journey throughout life. Tawakkul is invoked during hardship — a common phrase amongst Muslims is "ittiklo ala Allah", which translates to "rely on God" and is usually uttered to kin during times of hardship or during new journeys (e.g. weddings, physical moves, larger financial commitments or decisions). This orientation, as will be seen in this section, is often used to build comfort with

uncertainty. Tawakkul often requires a form of reflection — of looking at all the available options and information to act upon, choosing a path forward, and then putting your trust in a higher power as this choice is enacted. A famous hadith (saying) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad illustrates this: “Tie your camel first, and then put your faith in Allah.”

It occurred to me much later that the conversations participants and I had together was an act of trust and tawakkul in itself. We needed to build trust in each other over time, particularly at a time of heightened state surveillance. In a conversation with students at UCLA’s Popular University for Liberated Palestine — an outdoor alternative learning space that began in May 2024 — activist Mohammed Abu Jayyab shared that Palestinians create possibilities for themselves not just in organizing, planning, meeting, and physically resisting the Zionist entity but also in the act of coming together to reflect (Abu Jayyab, personal communication, 2024). This reflection requires deep trust in each other. If done well, tawakkul is a life-affirming act because it loops back into our praxis, opening pathways for us to see how all other acts have changed us.

Jihad

Jihad is a term in Islamic theology that is widely misunderstood. There are two types of jihad: The “Greater Jihad” is the struggle against one’s self, to purify the heart, enjoin in good, stray away from acts and beliefs that harm ourselves and others. The “Lesser Jihad” refers to an outward struggle, fighting against oppressive structures and their injustices. This latter definition is the one that has received the most public attention and has been appropriated and co-opted by rogue actors that Muslims have overwhelmingly denounced (e.g. ISIS) (Griffith-Jones, 2013). This study is focused on what it may mean to understand developmental science from the perspective of young people who may take seriously the idea of a Greater Jihad calling them to

become a human who is refining their soul. Abdullah Rothman (2021), a psychologist who proposed an Islamic model for the soul writes the following after interviewing eighteen Muslim scholars on their perspectives on the human psyche:

> Thus, the main focus for most of the participants in asking them to conceive of an Islamic paradigm of the person in relation to psychology was that it primarily entails struggling against the powerful influence of the *nafs* [soul] in the process of trying to come back into alignment with *fitrah* [divine, original state]. It was reported that this is essentially what is at the heart of the *deen* [religion] of Islam and what much of the commentary on the Qur'an elaborates. As Yahya [a participant] pointed out, in reference to the scholars who wrote those Qur'anic commentaries, 'It's the *mujahada,* the struggle over the *nafs,* it's back to psychology. It's just that they don't call it psychology. We're calling it psychology.' (Rothman, 2020, p. 6)

If this Greater Jihad — this process of refining a soul — is part of the socialization of young Arab American Muslims, then how does one view development? I contend that part of the task is to understand that development for this population must account for the fact that they may be approaching challenges with a soul in mind. This may influence the way they navigate, resist, and create. These ways of being-becoming and belonging have been written about extensively, but not with Islam centered. I will share an overview of this literature that this study was born out of and then discuss the aims of the study.

Grounding and Literature Review

"There is no understanding of the individual without the structural." — Dr. Lara Sheehi

The aim of this dissertation is to explore how young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities for themselves and to interrogate how Islam may guide their possibility-making. It was initially conceived to be an exploration about ideas of being-becoming and belonging, which are helpful frames for thinking about possibility-making. To be as holistic as possible, then, this

study weaves developmental theories with interdisciplinary perspectives, as shown in Table 1 below. The review of literature will follow this format, by first introducing the literature that is relevant to Arab American Muslim youth about being-becoming and belonging. Being-becoming is a one process here because within Islamic thought, the very act of being in relationship to all creation *is* indeed the act of becoming (Rothman, 2021).

This study aims to center Islamic thought, which considers the questions of being/becoming and belonging in unique ways that sometimes parallel dominant thought in developmental science but other times does not (Rothman, 2021). Islamic psychology is a main part of the interdisciplinary perspectives included here and will be highlighted on its own throughout the literature review. A main contention is that because Islam guides its followers to think about being-becoming and belonging in certain ways, youth who are socialized into these ways can experience contradictions and paradoxes by virtue of also being socialized through other narratives in the U.S. I will explore where these theoretical contradictions may exist in the literature, with the goal of building a methodology to explore this as a dissertation project. Before introducing the literature, I will give a brief overview of some history and context that have informed experiences of Arab American Muslims.

Additionally, a note about the age group and developmental focus of this study. As will be introduced later, the participants I work with are young adults ages 20-24. I use the term "youth" and understand that a more specific term is "young adults". The National Institutes of Health and World Health organization define young adulthood as the period between ages 18-26 (NIH, 2021). For ease of reading and writing, I use the term "youth" for this paper.

Why this age group? An extensive 2015 study led by various health, human services, and educational experts suggest that young adulthood is a critical developmental period in which

young people are navigating new contexts and demands, less predictable pathways than those in previous generations, and more contexts in which inequality is magnified (NIH, 2015). For this particular study, the participants from the 20-24 age range were recruited with these realities in mind. Many, but not all, were pursuing undergraduate studies during the time of the study and thus much of their observations and thinking were informed by their experiences of being in a university. All were juggling multiple work and family responsibilities, which also offered many observations about being-becoming and belonging. Learning how this age group navigates and responds to these contexts can inform educators, families, and community members who work with younger individuals who may not be engaged in the exact same spheres but are beginning to feel the pressures of society and social groups. Importantly, many of the 20-24 year olds in this study referenced key memories from their younger adolescent years (e.g. middle school and high school) where their first feelings of difference, non-belonging, and unsafety emerged. Understanding from these participants what could have been supportive at that time could be immensely helpful to adolescents.

Table 1

Focus areas and relevant literature

Focus area	Developmental literature	Interdisciplinary perspectives
Being-Becoming	● **Social identity theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) ● **Ethnic racial identity** (Rogers et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Ajrouch, Hakim-Larson, and Fakih, 2016) ● **Whiteness, hypervisibility, invisibility** (Qutami, 2020; Amer & Awad, 2016) ● **Intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1991)	● **DuBois' double consciousness** (DuBois, 1903) ● **Islamic perspectives on identity** (Rothman, 2021) ● **Hyphenated identities and third space** (Bhabha, 1994; Fine & Sirin, 2007) ● **Islamic perspectives on becoming** (Rothman, 2021; Abu El Fadl, 2022)

	• **Erikson's psychosocial identity theory** (Erikson, 1968) • **Personal, master, and alternative narratives** (McLean & Syed, 2021, 2015)	
Belonging	• **Belonging and the politics of belonging** (Yuval-Davis, 2006)	• **Transnationalism and diaspora** (Shams, 2020; Park, 2014) • **Palestine as a window** (Naber, 2014; Abdulhadi et al., 2011) • **Gender, violence, belonging** (Abdulhadi et al., 2011) • **Islamic perspectives on belonging** (Abou El Fadl, 2022)

Historical Background of Arab and Muslim Americans in the U.S.

Significant migration from the Arab world to the United States began in the 1870s and spanned nearly five decades, until immigration quotas were imposed by the U.S. government (Orfalea, 2006). Historians estimate that about 110,000 immigrants fled from the Ottoman empire's rule in what is now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. During this first wave of immigration, a relatively large number of Arabs settled in the Midwest — particularly in Detroit — where the burgeoning steel, car, and train industries attracted job-seekers. Due to restrictive immigration policies, very little immigration occurred in the early 20th century but steadily increased after 1965, when the U.S. reformed immigration laws. This second wave of Arab immigrants that began that year and spanned for several decades was very similar to the first wave, but with significantly larger numbers of Lebanese because of a national civil war and an increased number of Palestinians due to them being pushed out of their lands by the Israeli state. In the last twenty years, larger numbers of Egyptians, Iraqis, Syrians, and Yemenis have immigrated as well (Orfalea, 2006).

A common misconception is that discrimination towards Arab Americans and Muslim Americans began after the September 11, 2001 attacks, but historians have documented discriminatory incidents against Arab Americans occurring as early as 1914 (Naber, 2000). However, the September 11 attacks certainly hurled Arab Americans into an unwelcome spotlight. In 2002, a national study found that approximately 30% of Arabs surveyed reported personally experiencing discrimination and 40% knew of someone who had experienced discrimination since September 11th. Discrimination against Arab Americans was not solely conducted by random individuals, employers, and classroom peers. The state apparatus also peddled a racialization of Arabs by instituting new policies such as the USA PATRIOT Act (2001). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), a national civil rights organization created in 1980, fielded an increase in reports of civil liberty violations by the police and FBI after September 11th as well (Awad & Amayreh, 2015).

Mass media has also played a significant role in the racialization of Arab Americans in the U.S. Shaheen's (2003) seminal study investigated how Arabs were portrayed in over 900 films and illustrated that mass media engaged in "othering" Arabs by writing roles for them that were starkly distant from the "average American" (Shaheen, 2003). Arab men in particular are portrayed in films as "brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" (p. 172). In recent years, however, social media platforms have provided the space for younger Arab American youth to produce counternarratives to the hegemonic tendencies to "other" them in the U.S. Additionally, young Arab American youth employ social media to celebrate the "joy, humor, and creativity" of their families and cultures (Al-Muhaisen, 2021). As one commentator noted, these young creators are "taking back the very medium

through which these violence assumptions about their identities are produced" (Al Muhaisen, 2021).

Because race is socially and culturally constructed (Crenshaw, 1989; Omi & Winant, 2014), Muslims have also emerged as a racialized group in the U.S. due to various sociopolitical factors, preceding the War on Terror but certainly intensified by it (Beydoun, 2018). Maira's (2004) study with Muslims in the Boston area revealed that as a result of state violence against Muslims at home and abroad, Muslim youth in the U.S. were constructing an idea of "flexibile citizenship" in which there was a continued "contestation over ongoing issues of citizenship and transnationalism, religion and nationalism, civil rights and immigrant rights" (p. 228). A significant finding from Maira's work is that prior to September 11th, there was perceived distance between Arab American and South Asian American communities that identified as Muslims. After September 11th, however, these communities forged affinities with each other through their shared identity of being Muslim. This is confirmed by Naber's (2005) finding that Arab Americans in the Bay Area often engendered a "Muslim first" identity, and it is through this identity that the "politics of race, gender, and identity [are] imagined and performed" (p. 494). In sum, both Arabs and Muslims have been racialized before the attacks of September 11th and like any social identities, these identities overlap with others to create nuanced experiences for this population. This context has implications on how Arab American Muslims may come to understand *being-becoming.*

Being-Becoming

"Being" and "becoming", of course, are broad concepts. In this dissertation, I conceive of "being-becoming" as a process that involves negotiating or internalizing various narratives — and potentially creating something new. Individuals are constantly in the process of "becoming"

as a result of interacting with society, and society is always in the process of "becoming" as a result of being shaped by its individuals. More specific to developmental science, this study also defines being-becoming as being a member of social group(s) and being in relation to others within and outside a social group(s). One *is* and *becomes* by being in relationship with others[1].

Below I explore how this is conceptualized in the literature. This is the part of the dissertation study that is most complex precisely because of the breadth of interdisciplinary work that exists on being-becoming from fields as vast as philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. The scholarship below does not represent all scholarship on that matter, but rather the most relevant for the scope of this dissertation. Particular attention was paid to theories and frameworks that commented on power relations.

Developmental Theories

What is identity? This study adopts a definition of identity that is put forth by the 21st Century Ethnic Racial Identity Working Group, which "refers to the sense of self and one's understanding of and positioning within their social groups" (Rogers et al., 2020). Groups are important to understand for this study because they heavily influence a sense of self. Social identity theory, as posited by Tajfel & Turner (1986), suggests that part of an individual's self-concept is their affiliation to a social group or groups. A sense of "we-ness" is developed as part of being a member of this group. Individuals make meaning of these groups through the processes of social categorization and social comparison, taking note of similarities within and differences between groups. These processes, in turn, propel them to make meaning of the social world (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For both Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., this sense of "we-ness"

[1] This study focuses on being in relationship with other humans, although there is much to be said about being in relationship with land, animals, plants, and all creation. Participants did not speak too much to this and regretfully, I did not guide them in any particular direction that even allowed for a fuller discussion on these relationships. In future studies it would be important to approach conversations in a way that would allow for discussion about Arab American Muslims' relationships with the more-than-human world.

is not just defined by some shared customs and culture but also by the racialization they experience (Beydoun, 2018; Amer & Awad, 2016). As Younis and Hassan (2019) stated in their study with second-generation Muslims in the West, social identities are "group affiliations to which an individual ascribes" but "they are just as much political categories *imposed upon persons* — often despite themselves. In most cases, social identities are both" (p. 1166, emphasis added).

Because of this experience of being racialized — of having political categories and their associated connotations imposed on Arabs and Muslims — it is important to understand how ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is conceptualized in particular. ERI is defined as "the process and content of developing an understanding of and sense of belonging to one's ethnic and/or racial groups" (Rogers et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The roots of the field can be traced back to the 1970s and 80s, when scholars were studying how Black people were making meaning of what it meant to be Black in a racist society (Rogers et al., 2020)[2]. For Arab American Muslims, a critical piece of social identity theory in relation to ethnic-racial identity comes into play: Individuals are motivated to develop a social identity that is positive according to their group membership. If their social groups are cast in a negative (or ambiguous) light by society, however, it may have implications on how young people view their own group. In the *Handbook on Arab American Psychology,* Ajrouch, Hakim-Larson, and Fakih (2016) expand on this:

> …for members of socially devalued groups, such as Arab Americans, who are often portrayed in an unfavorable light (Sirin et al., 2008) that sometimes includes associations with terrorism (Sirin & Balasno, 2007), maintaining favorable definitions of group membership may be challenging. If Arab American youth internalize negative stereotypical beliefs and views of their own group from mainstream groups and media, they might be at risk for displaying lower

[2] It should be noted that many Arabs and/or Muslims are also Black.

> self-esteem and experiencing loss of meaning and a sense of confusion in their lives. However, Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed that in the fact of devaluation of their group, individuals may reinterpret the meaning of their group membership (social identity) by rejecting external judgments and by comparing themselves to the outgroup on a new dimension to which they are superior to reestablish positive distinctiveness…Accordingly, based on their socialization experiences and the larger social context in which they live, Arab American youth may adopt either a positive or negative view of their own group (pp. 92-93).

Indeed, the empirical evidence about Arab and/or Muslim youth points to both tendencies — flocking towards a positive view of their own group or a negative view (Ajrouch et al., 2016). The individual and the group influence each other, which is the main assertion of a theory of development by Erik Erikson (1968).

Erikson's psychosocial identity theory. Humans do not exist in a vacuum developing their sense of self away from the rest of society. Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial identity theory argued that identity develops as a "whole interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and historical" (Erikson, 1968, p. 23). Onnie Rogers (2018), in returning to Erikson's original model, urges scholars to not gloss over this major assertion in his model — that self and society and mutually constructing each other in a transactional process. She uses the term "transactional" to imply "the action of two agents — self and society; one does not act upon the other in a unidirectional fashion but rather both depend or act upon each other in bidirectional manner" (p. 286). What is needed, she argues, is a transactional lens that examines not only how contexts influence individual development but also how individuals shape society's development (Erikson, 1968). How to do this? She specifically argues that identifying and analyzing the narratives that individuals are exposed to is an effective way to understand this transactional relationship because humans are compelled by stories and storytelling. It is stories that "interlace self and society" (p. 287). Specifically, it is the "*process* of storytelling that

identities in turn shape society, such that master narratives are maintained and reinforced or repudiated and disrupted" (Rogers, 2018, p. 287).

Dominant, personal, and alternative narratives. Because Arab American Muslim youth are navigating multiple narratives, part of this dissertation's purpose was to be attuned to not only what youth think these narratives are and but also how they are implicated in their process of being-becoming. Rogers' (2018) quote above is in reference to another theoretical model that is at the core of this dissertation[3]. McLean & Syed (2021, 2015) developed a narrative model for identity development that posits that there are three types of narratives: master (dominant) narratives, personal narratives, and alternative narratives. Dominant narratives are widely-held ideas that are shared and offer a "cultural script that individuals draw upon — often unconsciously — when developing their own personal narratives" (McLean & Syed, 2021, p. 2). Importantly, they are drenched with the power structures of a given society — adopting them means adopting the status quo. An alternative narrative is created if one decides to "actively resist" (p. 2) the dominant narratives. These scripts are not merely different constructions but rather "push against the dominant forces of the master narratives and potentially transform them to accommodate new voices" (p. 2). The model can be employed to examine not just the *content* of what narratives are at play for an individual but also the *processes* involved in negotiating these various narratives. For this dissertation, I was interested in both content and process.

The content of various narratives in the lives of Arab American Muslim youth has been well documented, particularly after September 11th. Youth are indeed aware of the dominant narratives that emerge from broader American society as well as from interpretation of their

[3] The term "master" is problematic as it is the same term used in the phrase "slave master". Of course, McLean and Syed's (2018) use of the term was never in the same vein, but many have advocated retiring the word "master" regardless of how it is used today. I support this linguistic change. I will be using the term "dominant narrative" in this paper but McLean & Syed (2018)'s model uses the word "master" and will be maintained in this section to refer back to their specific model.

religion and culture (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2015; Ali, 2014; Childs et al., 2021; Harris, 2016; Naber, 2012; Ryan, 2014). However, what is just as crucial to this study is *how* young people are navigating and responding to these narratives. McLean & Syed (2021, 2015) describe two types of processes at the heart of their narrative framework: *internalization* (a more unconscious process) and *negotiation* (a more conscious process). In turning to the literature on Arab American Muslim youth, the extant scholarship documents that these youth have engaged in both, as highlighted briefly below. However, this is an area of research that needs more attention which this dissertation hopes to fill. Before turning to these two processes, a note on the narrative that prompts these responses in the first place: the dominant idea of Whiteness being desirable and good.

Proximity to Whiteness; being simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Scholars have described that an aspect of the Arab American Muslim experience is being hyper-visible yet simultaneously invisible (Qutami, 2020; Amer & Awad, 2016). This paradox is a result of sociopolitical realities. As Loubna Qutami (2020) asks: "What does it mean when a group whose humanity is persistently negated by the state, its institutions and cultural discourses, is simultaneously interpolated into whiteness? How does such a paradox serve to uphold systemic forms of white power?" (p. 163). Arabs are asked to tick the "White" box on forms like the U.S. census, prompting them to claim whiteness on paper but largely not receiving any of the benefits of it, including material public resources (Ajrouch et al., 2016; Qutami, 2020). In Sarah Gualtieri's (2009) historical research on early 20th century immigrants from Greater Syria, she suggests this has been true for quite some time. These early Arab Americans "grasped for whiteness at the margins of their experiences rather than challenge the *premise* that whiteness was a legitimate prerequisite for social, economic and political privilege" (p. 133). Qutami

(2020) notes that over the past century, however, Arab migrants are arriving with a more nuanced anti-imperialist political consciousness and a deeper sense of ethnic pride that has already been pivotal in challenging the dominant narrative of whiteness.

Still, the dominant narrative is strong, namely because it is accompanied by structures that have ramped up the racialization of both Arabs and Muslims. Qutami (2020) notes that the conflation of "Muslim", "Arab", "other", and "terrorist" in general discourse and state logics means that Arab and Muslim communities are especially vulnerable to both interpersonal and state-led violence. The War on Terror launched a number of programs to track and surveil Arabs and Muslims and while there is not enough space in this document to detail these initiatives, it is "vital to consider the War on Terror as an extension of past wars (the War on Drugs, the Cold War, etc.)" (Qutami, 2020, p. 182) that have also impacted Black, indigenous, immigrant, and other communities. The reason this is crucial is because of its impact on meaning-making. One can make sense of the hyperracialization of Arabs and Muslims as a result of a series of poor presidencies, a random assortment of distasteful policies, or a vague "national security" issue. Instead, scholars argue that we must place the War on Terror — and its impact on Arab and Muslim Americans — within the historical context of the U.S., which is a settler colonial state that is still committed to building a U.S. empire globally (Qutami, 2020; Naber, 2012; Salaita, 2006). Thus making Arabs and Muslims a very visible and feared "other" is crucial to the goals of the American project. We will visit what Edward Said (1978) has to say about this shortly.

What does this mean for Arab American Muslim youth? First and foremost, what is well understood is that this paradox of being hyper-visible and simultaneously invisible can take a toll on the well-being of Arab American Muslim youth and complicates their task of answering the question of "Who am I?" (Amer & Awad, 2016). Britto and Amer's (2007) study of Arab

American Muslim youth's well being revealed significant stress, partially as a result of the complexity of navigating multiple cultures but also living through the post-September 11th sociopolitical landscape. Amer and Hovey's (2012) study demonstrated that Arab Americans reported a higher rate of depression than other standardized samples of four other ethnic minority groups. We also know that these youth repeatedly encounter — and often internalize — the stereotypes and generalizations as found by Ajrouch, Hakim-Larsen, and Fakih's (2015) review of literature. Second, some Arab American Muslim youth may feel tempted to embrace a proximity to Whiteness, while others intentionally distance themselves. Ajrouch and Jamal's (2007) study found that whether Arab Americans associated or disassociated themselves with Whiteness was also related to their religious backgrounds, socioeconomic class, and education levels — a point that will be revisited when discussing intersectionality. In her focus groups with Arab American youth, Ajrouch (2004) found that young people actively negotiated the "boater-white poles of identity" (p. 378) and the boundaries between the poles were shaped by gender and interpretations of religion. While clarifying, these studies are somewhat dated and do not explicitly call out how the ongoing War on Terror impacts how young people make meaning out of their proximity to (or distance from) whiteness. Specifically, there is a need for more documentation of the meaning-making processes Arab American Muslim youth engage in that leads to either positive or negative perception of their own social groups (Ajrouch et al., 2016). Part of what should be explored, then, is not just conscious language about how youth describe themselves but rather the deeper reasons someone would want to maintain a relationship with Whiteness in the first place.

Internalizing. This is largely an unconscious process that will not be a central focus of this study but will be briefly reviewed here. We can trace the roots of this pattern back to Edward

Said's groundbreaking work in his book *Orientalism* (1978) describes that the West portrays the "East" as a static, unchanging, "Other". This tendency was spurred on by the imperialist societies that produced this very conceptualization. Another important assertion of Orientalism is that many people may be unconsciously internalizing the narratives propagated by these imperialist productions. In addition to Ali (2014) and Wang et al.'s (2020) studies mentioned earlier, Ghaffar-Kucher's (2012) study with Pakistani American Muslim youth also picked up on some participants "playing into the terrorist stereotype" (p. 49) in an attempt to "find other ways to belong". Thus, there is documentation that some level of internalization of stereotypes is occurring amongst Arab American Muslim youth. Of note is that many of the studies that highlight the ways their participants internalize narratives are over a decade old. When possible, a unique contribution of this dissertation is to document additional ways in which youth may be internalizing Orientalist ideas about themselves, but also tracking whether these ideas may have come from. It may not be possible to do so completely, but there may be an opportunity to reveal additional nuance in internalization processes.

Negotiating. Of far more interest, however, are the various ways youth are negotiating their identities — and the language scholars are using to describe these negotiations. There is a large variety of language and literature to describe negotiation processes. Consider how Ozyurt (2013) — who will be reviewed later — described negotiation:

> ...there is also not just one way of negotiating bicultural identities. A careful review of the psychological literature on biculturalism suggests that there are important differences in how biculturals negotiate their dual identities, cultural practices, and life-worlds and cope with the (perceived) tension between them...Some develop a hyphenated (blended) identity...while others alternate or switch between two identities depending on available cultural cues in the social environment...I argue that successful negotiation of bicultural identities depends not so much on whether the individual

> perceives these identities and cultures to be compatible with each other, but rather on the availability of a coherent self-narrative of belonging to both cultural worlds" (Ozyurt, 2013, p. 242).

Ozyurt (2013) is correct in observing that there is not just one way of negotiation. A process of particular interest is the creation of a third space, and specifically a hyphenated self. Both will be reviewed shortly. A helpful model for understanding these processes can be found in literature emerging from work with Asian American youth.

A model of Asian American youth development. Jayanthi Mistry and colleagues' (2016) conceptual framework on Asian American youth heavily emphasizes that meaning-making emerges from culture. Their model posits that "culture" is both the values, practices, and ideologies of the groups youth belong to *and* the meaning-making processes employed to interpret the contexts around them (J. Mistry et al., 2016). In other words, culture is both something youth can articulate but also a lens through which they make sense of their worlds. This definition of the term culture is remarkably similar to McLean and Syed's (2015) definition of narrative, which they define as "not only a product, but also a process of reconstruction and interpretation that reflects human development in a specific cultural and historical space" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 337). Thus, what is clear between these two theories is that processes — not just a description of contexts — is important to conceptualizing identity.

A strength of J. Mistry and colleagues' (2016) model is that it specifically takes into account an important developmental domain relevant for Arab American Muslim youth: multiple fluid identities. In this model, the authors propose that Asian American children are charged with "navigating multiple ethnic and racialized identities" (p. 1022), particularly in a context where they may experience racism and stereotyping as a result of narratives. Thus, participants may choose their own identifications that are "fluid and context dependent" (p. 1022) that allow them

to decide how best to express themselves at any given time or place. This conceptualization affords “a flexibility that belies the typically hypothesized developmental endpoint of achieving a consistent sense of identity” (p. 1022). This point is particularly salient when working with Arab American Muslim youth as they, too, must navigate multiple narratives. Moreover, young people are navigating a variety of social positions, rendering it possible for one individual’s experience to be vastly different from another’s.

Intersectionality. As mentioned earlier, intersectionality is a critical lens that grants the possibility for one person to experience their world in a dramatically different way than another individual as a result of the varying social positions they hold, including but not limited to their class, gender, sexuality, and documentation status (Crenshaw, 1991). A goal of this study is to capture this plurality of experience in a way that legitimizes the sociopolitical realities (e.g. being racialized as Arab and Muslim) while simultaneously not centering these realities as the *sole* foundation of their experiences. In other words, to answer the question “Who am I?”, Arab American Muslim youth can and will flock to a variety of truths in their lives that includes racialization but will certainly not be limited to it.

Rogers (2018) contends that an intersectional approach in identity research can be seen as an “empirical window” into how one’s position in society shapes how an individual sees themselves and their experiences in the world. Ghavami and colleagues (2016) stress that there are still remaining questions of *how* identities intersect and overlap, noting that there are still not enough studies that examine multiple social identities at the same time. Interestingly, there are a number of published works spanning literature, film, and the visual arts that consider the intersection of social identities of Arab American Muslims. However, there are far fewer studies grounded in developmental science — that is, there are a minimal number of studies that see

social development through the prism of intersectionality for this population. There are some exceptions. Building on the previously mentioned Ajrouch (2004) study, Abdel-Salam and her colleagues' (2019) interviews with young Arab American women affirmed that they were not only hyperaware of being Arab in broader American society, but that they described "a need to be hyperaware and responsive to societal and familial expectations" (p. 255). The authors state that the women "described a no-win situation: when perceived as Arab they faced stereotyping and discrimination, and when not perceived as Arab, they felt invisible and invalidated" (Abdel-Salam et al., 2019, p. 265). Young Arab American Muslim men in Kumar et al.'s (2014), however, took pride in being both Arab and Muslim. However, they did express frustration with the stereotypes they endure, particularly that of "violent Arab male" (p. 38). A major finding of the study is that the participants felt "hopeless and helpless" about this stereotype and turned to a variety of coping mechanisms — including stereotype-confirming behavior (Spencer, 1999).

Studies like these honor what Rogers & Syed (2020) push for in developmental science — a curiosity of "how intersectionality is *experienced, perceived,* and *rationalized* by young people who are in the process of learning what it means to occult these intersectional identity locations" (p. 14). What is notable about these cited studies is that they illuminate the ways participants *felt* as a result of these interlocking systems of oppression, but there is little commentary on the *meaning* and *possibilities* derived from these intersecting social identities. This dissertation aimed to extend the questions posed by these aforementioned studies but with a particular emphasis on the meaning-making young people make out of being Arab American Muslims.

Examining "being-becoming", then, requires being attuned to the interlocking structures of power that produce varied experiences within one group. While these structures are

everywhere — from the home to the school — they are evolving in the way they are manifested and expressed. This also suggests that the idea of "being-becoming" as a member of a social group is far from a static relationship. Instead, self and society are constantly shaping each other, with each one "becoming" as a result of being intertwined with the other. Because society is involved heavily in this process, additional perspectives on being-becoming are presented below from fields outside of but adjacent to developmental psychology.

I contend that the work of being-becoming involves both the *acceptance that you are multiple things at the same time* and the *creation of something new* that is expressed in everyday life. There are a number of words and phrases that have been used to describe what this "new" identity is called. A major theoretical goal of this dissertation is to observe how young people accept this reality of their own multiplicity as well as how they forge "new identities". I will begin with DuBois' idea of double consciousness and then move into a brief review of literature about new identities. To my knowledge, there are four terms used in studies with youth to describe novel identities: third space and hybrid selves (Bhabha, 1994; Ozyurt, 2013), hyphenated identity (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Katsiaficas et al., 2011), new identity (Naber, 2012), and enmeshed identities (Younis & Hassan, 2019). For the sake of clarity and proximity to developmental paradigms, for this study I will adopt the language of third space and hyphenated selves.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

DuBois' concept of double consciousness. Some scholars have argued that DuBois' concept of double consciousness can also be extended to Arab and Muslim Americans. Speaking specifically about the Black experience, DuBois's (1903) piece — notably titled *Of Our Spiritual Strivings* — argued that Black people experienced a "double consciousness", a "sense of always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others…One ever feels his twoness…two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (p. 12). Hatem Bazian (2013) argues that this concept can be applied to the Muslim diaspora because of colonialism and the continued discourse about Muslims in the post-colonial state. Citing Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, Bazian (2013) sees that "The Muslim subject in colonial discourse [as] ahistorical, static and rationally incapacitated so as to legitimise intervention and disruption of the supposed 'normal' and persistent 'backwardness'" (Bazian, 2013). Bazian warns that to some extent, some Muslims have internalized this discourse, as evidenced by their willingness to look at themselves through the eyes of the West.

Indeed, Ali (2014) found that Muslim undergraduates in the U.S. were aware of this tendency, particularly in the ways they sometimes represented themselves as "pre-modern, prone to violence, and [engaging] in oppressive gendered binaries" (p. 1257). Wang and colleagues (2020) also interviewed young Muslim Americans (18-30 years old) to understand how they reconcile what it means to be Muslim in the U.S. Their findings echo Ali's (2014) conclusions about how young Muslims find the sociopolitical racialization of Muslims challenging, but also highlight the in-group pressures from within the Muslim community. Participants cited that because of this sociopolitical atmosphere, they felt pressure to "appear as a 'united' community, when in reality, they were a heterogeneous group of individuals striving to find acceptance and belonging amidst the diversity'" (p. 343). This pressure created what the authors called a "double bind of being judged by Muslims and non-Muslims" (p. 343) and a pressure to constantly navigate those judgments. Both of these studies illustrate that there is attention paid to how one "looks" to other social groups, namely non-Muslims, confirming a sort of double consciousness

at play. Prins and colleagues (2015) noted a similar phenomenon with second generation Muslims residing in the Netherlands. Their participants expressed that their hypervisibility as Muslims often translated into a pressure of feeling like they had to represent everyone in their social groups. One participant shared "I am not responsible for what every Moroccan does" (p. 176) and also expressed frustration of feeling like all eyes were on him as a result of xenophobic ideology in parts of the Netherlands.,

Arab Americans are also thought to be grappling with Duboisian double consciousness. Abdul-Jabbar (2015) notes that the same forces of colonialism impacted Arabs — regardless of their religious affiliation. In a study of the Arab American and Muslim American experience after September 11, Louis Cainkar (2009) notes that one manifestation of the Arab double-consciousness was seen when "Arab Muslims described conducting routine activities, such as loading their car trunks or checking their mail, with the sense that they might be watched" (p. 144). Nadine Naber (2012) notes that this constant awareness of potentially being watched results in a self-inflicted "internment of the psyche", a way to manage the "effects of the state penetrat[ing] everyday actions" (p. 144). In her 2012 study with Arab Americans in the Bay Area, Naber's participants described various accounts of "psychological pressure to maintain perceived ideals of Arab and American culture felt overwhelming and irresolvable" (p. 5).

Two concluding notes: First, it should be noted that some of this literature is over a decade old (with the exception of Wang and colleagues' 2020 study cited). As American imperialism continues to construct a Muslim and Arab "Other", more conversations with Arab American Muslim youth in the present moment must be conducted to identify if and how this double consciousness manifests for them. Second, experiencing double consciousness is not the end of the story. What one *does* with this sensation is of great interest to this study. While

overwhelming, double consciousness has and is being transformed by many young Arab American Muslims today to make meaning of who they are *and* to consider their navigation of multiple cultures and narratives as an incredible asset — potentially as a pathway towards creating something new.

Third space and hyphenated selves. Bhabha's (1994) seminal book *The Location of Culture* critically examined how individuals employ, disrupt, and perform culture and create something new. Emerging from postcolonial studies, Bhabha argues that some individuals create a "third space" for themselves, in which they form a hybrid identity of sorts that emerges as a result of weaving many parts of themselves and many identities. This means individuals move away from essentialist notions of identity(ies) and instead create something distinctly novel. An important dimension of Bhabha's argument is that there is no *one way* individuals will create distinct identities for themselves. In other words, everyone's third space can and will look different.

The creation of third spaces was a central finding in Ozyurt's (2013) semi-structured interviews with 1st and 2nd generation Muslim immigrant women (ages 18-26) in both Southern California and the Netherlands. The study illustrated that a number of women had not only created their third spaces but had made peace with it. One participant was described as someone who "owns, rather than resists, her multiple identities [because] it enables her to do what she does best: act as a bridge builder between the two cultures and communities" (p. 257). The participants perceived themselves as "cultural mediators" who "construct[ed] coherent self-narratives of who they are and how they belong" (p. 261). While Ozyurt does not actually define what "coherent" means, she instead suggests that this may be up to the individual themselves.

Ozyurt's observations are not far from those of another study, this time with Muslim youth in the U.S. Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine (2007) write that the idea of hyphenated selves emerged from a long lineage of concepts, including DuBoisian double consciousness as mentioned earlier:

> The hyphenated selves framework, then, sits in a crowded conceptual parking lot. The specific theoretical intervention we address, however, lies in the *social–psychological space*, the membrane, between contentious social contexts and youth subjectivities and innovations, focused on troubled relations between self and other. Young people can be *born* at a hyphen, in political cracks between social identities, as W. E. B. Du Bois so eloquently described the 'double consciousness' of African-Americans (1903/1982). Youth may *experience a politically induced shift i*n the foundational plates of social arrangements that incites a tremor between two previously compatible identities, as in the case of 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror' and Patriot Act in the USA. Alternatively, a young person may *decide to step out onto a hyphen*, making public a slice of self that challenges normative expectations as Gough writes on gay athletes (2007; see also Garnets & D'Augelli, 1994). Or children may be *thrust onto a hyphen of survival*, removed from or thrown out of their homes by parents, social workers, landlords, the INS. A dynamic social–psychological site of taboo and desire, fear and challenge, voice and silence, despair and possibility, collusion and resistance, hiding and activism, the hyphenated selves framework sets up a lively, tension-filled, viscous and porous space for psychological theory and challenges for design and method (p. 23, emphasis added).

There is thus both a possibility for one to choose to be thrown into a hyphen as well as a possibility for a hyphen to be imposed on someone. Sirin and Fine came at this both theoretically and empirically. After September 11th, they designed a participatory study with 200 Muslim American youth to understand how they were making meaning out of their identities in the wake of these attacks (Fine & Sirin, 2007). In Ghavami and colleagues' (2016) review of Sirin & Fine's study, they succinctly described that the "hyphens" landed differently for each participant:

> The intersections, or hyphens, varied across participants, however through the coding of identity maps, three overarching categories of hyphens arose. Some of these intersections were narrated as new fusions that arose whereby identities

> were *integrated*. Some depicted themselves at the center of blossoming flower where each overlapping petal represented a different social identity category. For others, the intersections remained unconnected and were depicted as *parallel* identities. For one participant, the identity map depicted a road where the paths between ethnic and country of origin identities intersected with their Muslim identity, alongside a parallel road representing the "American" identity. And yet for others, the ways in which these identities intersected were through *conflict*. As one young man depicted through his identity map two swords clashing, one marked "Islam" and one marked "The West" (Sirin & Fine, 2008). If only a single identity had been examined (such as Muslim identity), the opportunities to understand the complexity that arose based on the intersections of those identity categories would have been missed (p. 58).

This is a good time to refer back to ideas of intersectionality. Syed and McLean (2021) emphasize that we may study multiple identities but not all approaches necessarily are intersectional. Ghavami and colleagues' (2016) observation about intersectionality is that there are , that the "remaining questions for developmental research are *when* and *how* these strands of identity overlap and intersect within an individual and the consequences of such intersecting social group memberships for development" (p. 33). Thus, to study "becoming" and being attuned to how these identities come together to form a hyphenated self also means it is imperative to pay attention to the details — as opposed to simply identifying that a hyphen exists. An additional note is Fine & Sirin's (2007) and Ozyurt's (2013) studies are nearly a decade old. There is a need for new data situated in the current context to build upon their findings about narratives and hyphenated selves. More pressingly, there is a need for a model to conceptualize not just the meaning-making but also the possibility-making Arab American Muslim youth engage in about being-becoming.

Because of the varied ways being-becoming can manifest, it is also important to understand what the Islamic perspective is on "becoming" and how it may influence young people in their own processes.

Islamic Psychology

As mentioned, the combined faculty of heart-mind is integral to being-becoming. Moreover, this faculty is part of the overall self, which Islam calls the soul. The soul is the integrated amalgamation of nafs (ego or 'lower self'), qalb-aql (heart-mind), and ruh (divine spirit) (Rothman, 2021). The heart-mind is the core of this soul, but all other parts can be involved in meaning-making as well. To my knowledge, there are no studies with Arab American Muslim youth that examine how they make meaning of "being" through the lens of Islamic psychology, particularly engaging the integrated heart-mind.

Because the mind — and thus intellect — is considered to be a part of the heart, inviting the heart into research is necessary for fully engaging the meaning-making youth do. This can be especially helpful in interrogating phenomena described in this section — being hypervisible and invisible, double consciousness, varied experiences of being as a result of different social positions. Meaning-making can be overwhelming, a process that is more than just a cognitive exercise. This is illustrated well a participant in Naber's (2012) study:

> As Nuha, a daughter of Jordanian immigrants put it, "Sometimes it can make you crazy because you can't get out. I have so many worlds and every world is a whole other world. But in your mind they're totally separated, but then they're all there in your mind together. You get to a point that you are about to explode." (Naber, 2012, p. 5).

For Nuha, "being" is related to her feeling of "you are about to explode". Abdullah Rothman's (2021) grounded theory study with Islamic scholars and Muslim psychotherapists reveals why an Islamic lens would interpret this excerpt differently. An Islamic model of the soul illustrates that "many of the fundamental notions of the nature of humankind, the purpose and meaning of existence, and the developmental trajectory of a person's psychology are distinctively different from those of the Western paradigm" (p. 3). As researchers, then, an "indigenous understanding

of their inner lives" (p. xiv) through the lens of Islamic psychology would invite Nuha to engage her heart-mind in meaning-making — that is, to tie her cognition to emotion.

In Islam, being a human is effectively the same as becoming a human who is advancing their soul towards an ultimate form of Love. God is the only source of Love, so therefore the process of becoming is about taking steps to be closer to God (Rothman, 2021). Moreover, God represents justice and beauty, as described by Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl (2022):

> It is so easy to lose oneself in distraction in a shrunken world of mass information, mass communication, and technology. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that we belong to a faith with the creed that what comes from God must be beautiful, and anything that is not beautiful cannot come from our Lord. Our Lord, by definition, is the source of light, Light means beauty and purity. The idea that ugliness can coexist with Divinity is a contradiction in terms. It is impossible (p. 67).

Importantly, Dr. Abou El Fadl also adds that "Justice is a precondition of beauty; if there is no justice, there can be no beauty" (p. 69). Thus, an interpretation of "becoming" in Islam is the intentional walk towards God, light, beauty — and crucially, justice. Justice requires collective will, and thus Dr. Abou El Fadl warns against narrow asceticism, where one is focused solely on their individual soul and is uninterested in the material and political realities of the world (Abou El Fadl, 2022). The implication of this is far-reaching for this dissertation — to understand becoming from an Islamic perspective, then, is to interrogate the processes youth engage in to make meaning out of varied narratives while also paying attention to how those processes serve themselves *and* serve the collective of humanity. To my knowledge, no studies with Arab American Muslim youth have explored what "becoming" means with an Islamic lens. This is a gap this study hopes to fill.

Belonging

Like “being” and “becoming”, the concept of “belonging” is also broad. In fact, belonging is intertwined with many of the ideas discussed above in the sections about being and becoming sections. Here I build on all the literature shared thus far and focus on additional select ideas from developmental science about belonging while bringing in perspectives from other disciplines.

Developmental theories

As social creatures, humans are motivated to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Feeling excluded can be disruptive to an individual’s development, including their psychological wellbeing and identity formation (Eisenberger, 2012; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009). For the purposes of this study, I adopt Yuval-Davis’ (2006) conceptualization of belonging. She asserts that belonging is a feeling — a sense of being “at home” and “safe” (p. 197), but it is also politicized when it is threatened in some way. Individuals thus look for ways to belong in a variety of ways and are especially attuned to how political contexts change with whom and what they flock to. The emotions attached to belonging to a particular group can also change over time, especially if they feel “more threatened and less secure” (p. 2020). Moreover, she supports the idea that individuals have an “imagined community” with boundaries around who can belong in that space (Anderson, 2006). Thus, the “politics of belonging involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of dominant political powers but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents” (p. 205).

For Arab American and Muslim American communities, these dominant political powers carry narratives that shape ideas of belonging. Some perspectives on this are described briefly below.

Interdisciplinary perspectives

Transnationalism and Diaspora. The literature of this field is vast and largely rooted in anthropology and sociology, but one empirical study is worth highlighting for this study. Tasneem Shams' (2020) study with South Asian Muslim youth in the U.S. revealed that they identified with multiple places — "here" (the U.S.), "there" (the lands their families also call home, such as Pakistan or Syria), and "elsewhere" (spaces such as France, where recent terrorist attacks by ISIS placed Muslims in the global spotlight). Shams' study challenges the traditional "dyadic homeland-hostland framework" (p. 5) and suggests that youth's identifications with land and place "transcend state boundaries and social borders — thus connecting 'here', 'there', and 'beyond'" (p. 5). This is an extension of the reigning theory in diasporic studies — transnational theory — which "reconfigures migration as a dynamic and multisited process existing beyond the borders of a single nation-state" (Park, 2014, p. 2). Kyeyoung Park's (2014) work Korean immigrants in North and South America suggests the idea of a "rhizomatic diaspora", or a migratory formation that covers three or more places immigrants consider to be "home". Importantly, Park (2014) suggests that a rhizome — a metaphor that mirrors plants like ginger that grow horizontally below the ground with many modes — is "always in the process of becoming" (p. 4). I add that this means rhizomatic diasporic communities are thus perpetually always in the process of defining belonging.

Palestine as a window into belonging and nonbelonging. Nadine Naber (2014) states that "No context better elucidates the workings of U.S. Empire inside the empire than that of Palestinian and Arab diasporic activism in the United States" (p. 1109). The intersecting structures of power ultimately "shape negotiations over belonging and nonbelonging" (Abdulhadi et al., 2014, p. xxvi), particularly for those in diaspora. A core structure relevant to

Arab American Muslim youth is continued U.S. imperialism. As described, much can be said about how American imperialist projects influence how Arab American Muslims define where and how they belong. Perhaps the best illustration of this is by examining the diaspora's relationship to Palestine. As Abdulhadi et al. (2011) described, there are two dynamics at play: First, the Palestinian diaspora is greater than the number of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and occupied territories combined. Second, the alliance between the U.S. and Israel has repeatedly reinforced images of Palestinians as terrorists, labeling their resistance against Israeli occupation as terrorism. This was true far before September 11th, but the attacks spurred an even broader use of the term, now applied to anyone perceived to be Arab or Muslim. Both American imperialist policies and mainstream media contributed to this.

The reason this is important to articulate is because it is a window with which to view the political nature of belonging and nonbelonging. At present, to support Palestinian efforts for liberation carries heavy consequences — at best, being called a terrorist at a protest and at worst, facing a job getting terminated, a contract not being renewed, or deportation (Abdulhadi et al., 2011). It is no wonder, then, that expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause — and seeking belonging with this social group — may not be welcomed excitedly by many Arab American Muslims who are already being subjected to dominant narratives. However, the popularity and growth of youth organizing efforts, such as Palestinian Youth Movement and the US Palestinian Community Network, may suggest otherwise. Abu El Haj (2015) worked with Palestinian youth in the U.S. — whose findings are written in a book appropriately titled *Unsettled Belonging* — and noted the "disjunctures of citizenship" (p. 2) that Palestinian youth face as a result of "exclusionary politics of belonging merging out of the routine practices of everyday US

nationalism *inside their schools*" (p. 2). This anthropological study reinforces the idea that we should look to everyday encounters to make meaning of the larger narratives at play.

Gender, violence, and belonging are interrelated. Moreover, the authors of the volume *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (2011) articulate that gender, violence, and belonging are inextricably related to each other and produce unique realities for Arab Americans. This harkens back to the earlier discussion on intersectionality, where it is crucial to understand how these interlocking systems of oppression create different experiences for a community as broad as Arab American Muslims. Citing Black feminist scholars like bell hooks, Abdulhadi and colleagues (2011) call for a "theory in the flesh", or "knowledge derived from narrating lived experiences and producing critical lenses through which we see and analyze the social and political world" (p. xxi) to make sense of these complex, interrelated realities. This is echoed by Mandviwala's (2015) study with young Muslim girls, where she repeatedly noted how the participants easily described their emotions and sensations, especially when describing uncomfortable situations with peers. These empirical studies reject the idea "that personal narratives and theoretical analysis are mutually exclusive and antithetical" (Abdulhadi et al., 2011) and were taken seriously as I constructed a study methodology that honors theorizing from the flesh.

Islamic psychology

We are interrelated: An Islamic perspective on belonging. As mentioned earlier, Islam contends that an individual's process of "becoming" involves taking steps towards God, and therefore light, beauty, and justice. Moreover, it is believed that all personal steps towards God will be reflected in the collective, just as all steps towards darkness will also be reflected in the collective. Thus, the pursuit of justice requires a collective effort and cannot be achieved through

sole individual effort (Rothman, 2021). Islam posits that we are all connected to each other and to the Earth, but it might not be appropriate to say that we all *belong* to the collective in the way Yuval-Davis (2006) conceptualizes it. While there is no central idea of how "belonging" is perceived in Islam, this dissertation advances the idea that a core tenant of Islam is addressing injustice because of obligations to advancing the collective, and not just the individual self. The centrality of this is described by Dr. Abou El Fadl (2022):

> I do not see Islam when I see that the reaction of Muslims in the face of injustice is to say, "The is just the way things are." That is not Islam…God challenges us to establish justice and to overcome injustice and aggression…For as long as we do not realize that Islam is, heart and soul, a rebellion against injustice, oppression, despotism, and suffering, then we have betrayed Islam itself (p. 162).

For young people socialized into Islam, words by Dr. Abou El Fadl and his likes may inspire them to negotiate their identities in ways that align with movement towards collective justice, such as expressing solidarity with Palestinians despite the hardships they may have to endure. How this Islamic perspective influences ideas of belonging, however, has not been studied to my knowledge.

Current Study

This study was initially conceived with research questions about how Arab American Muslim youth perceive themselves — with a focus on being-becoming and belonging. As the study began, it was becoming increasingly clear that there could be extensive commentary on these concepts but that much of the commentary would be philosophical and abstract in nature with some tangible examples. While there is value in documenting this, the methods allowed for me to see participants evolve over time and what was revealed was a window into how participants *act* in everyday life. I thus shifted my focus to the following aims for an exploratory study:

1. To explore how young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities for themselves
2. To explore the ways in which their relationship to Islam guides their creation of possibility.

Because this study is exploratory, its design as a qualitative, interview-based study was maintained but careful adjustments were made to allow participants even more freedom to speak about their actions, rather than just their thoughts. Before explaining the methods of this study, I will share some information about who I am as a researcher.

Positionality Statement

I consider myself an evolving person who harbors multiplicities, contradictions, and complexities. The places I call home are Lebanon, Palestine, the lands of the Chumash and Tongva/Gabrieleno people (called Los Angeles), the lands of the Jumano, Wichita, Kiikaapoi, and Tawakoni people (called Dallas), and the lands of the Peoria, Anishinabewaki, and Potowatomi people (called Detroit). I was raised in a household that practices Islam and through my own journey, I ventured through atheism, agnosticism, Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Islam. I am cis-gendered, able-bodied woman who regularly questions her sexuality. I navigated graduate school with some financial support as well as some hardship but am fortunate to have had resources available and the means to navigate it.

In addition to all the socialization that occurred between the lands, communities, and experiences I named, of note is that I became a psychotherapist during the time of conceiving this study, conversing with participants, and writing this dissertation. My supervision and training has been heavily focused on the idea that humans bury pain, inconsistencies, and threats into a subconscious self. Although this study was not designed to work with participants to potentially access their subconscious — this would require years of interpersonal contact and a

completely different methodology — much of my training seeped into how I related to participants more broadly. It was impossible for me to open the Zoom screen and treat our conversations as merely “interviews”. Instead, I loosely postured myself in the same way I do for my clients — being open to turns in conversation, being curious about language and its inconsistencies, and paying close attention to affect as I believe they have much to say about our internal rumblings that have not yet been fashioned into a linguistic articulation. All of this, I contend, made the process richer and the relationships with my participants deeper.

Methods

An exploration of how young people think about the self requires an approach that is as open to the various experiences, desires, curiosities, and contradictions a person may hold. The “self” may not ever be understood in full in an entire lifetime, and certainly cannot be grasped holistically in a single interview. From the outset of this work, it was clear that this study would need to invite participants to multiple conversations in order to go deeper into the complexities they hold as people. I will first describe the methods used in this study, followed by observations about the qualitative research process which I contend is data in itself. For more notes on the methods used in this study, including an explanation of how this approach, interview style, and decisions came to be, see Appendix B.

An Islamic paradigmatic approach to research

The major intention of this study was to be in relationship and conversation with Arab American Muslim youth over time. Another intention was to understand how Islam influences the way young people talk about who they are. While Muslims are not a monolith, people who grow up with Islam are generally taught that we are spiritual beings in human form whose purpose in this form is to purify the soul in order to maintain a relationship with Allah (God) and

submit to a divine design of the universe and all creation. Muslims are also taught that the development of their own soul is not just an individual project — the soul is refined *by being in relationship* with humans and the more-than-human world. The Qur'an provides guidance on how to be in relationship with all creation with a focus on justice.

Most importantly, Islam teaches that the spiritual center of humans is the heart, not the mind. The heart is understood to be the space where intellect and consciousness is housed along with emotion (Rothman & Coyle, 2018). Within the Islamic paradigm, the "aql [mind] is in effect a function of the qalb [heart]" (Rothman & Coyle, 2020, p. 10). In other words, intellect and consciousness emerge from the heart, which can perceive far more than the mind can alone. This combined mind-heart faculty stands in contrast to some of Western psychology, which a participant in Abdullah Rothman's (2021) study reminds us can lean towards a "belief that the mind is completely separate and that's what governs things, whereas in the Islamic tradition, the whole idea is that it's in the heart…[the heart] thinks even" (p. 84). The heart — and specifically the "connection between cognition and emotion" (Rothman & Coyle, 2020, p. 10) — must be engaged to fully make meaning. Moreover, the heart itself is the main medium from which a Muslim connects to God.

Thus, it felt important to design a study that did not just have a methodology that would engage this combined heart-mind faculty but that would also start with the assumptions of Islamic ways of knowing and being. I looked to Margaret Kovach's (2019) writing about adopting not just a method but also a paradigm. "It is not the method, per se, that is the determining characteristic of Indigenous methodologies, but rather the interplay (the relationship) between the method and paradigm and the extent to which the method itself is congruent with an Indigenous worldview" (p. 124). I cannot argue that Islam itself is an

"Indigenous worldview" — the word Indigenous suggests that there is a relationship to land, amongst many other considerations. Islam itself spread throughout lands that were already inhabited by many. Some practices were subsumed within Islam, others were abandoned or stigmatized (Ware, 2014). The point I am trying to make, however, is that while we cannot call Islam an *indigenous* worldview, it is still a worldview. Kovach offers the metaphor of a nest with chicks or hatchlings within it. The nest is the paradigm from which all flows — epistemology and methodology especially. This positions the researcher — myself — as within the nest with the participants.. She writes that "It is the oft-ephemeral and non-discrete moments that form a lasting inter-relationship of the hatchlings/chicks in the nest that offer knowledge in understanding the chicks themselves, the chicks as a family/community, the nest itself, and the world outside of the nest" (p. 126).

Translating this to the current study, Islam is the paradigm that holds the assumptions about the human condition described earlier. Kovach would argue that a "particular research approach flows from an Indigenous belief system that has at its core a relational understanding and accountability to the world" (p. 126). To my knowledge, there is not a research approach within developmental science that emerges from Islam. Part of the motivation for this study was to attempt a methodology that could *allow* for the Islamic worldviews of participants to take up space without contestation or skepticism. The best approach, then, was person-centered interviewing.

Person-centered interviewing

Emerging from anthropology, person-centered interviewing employs both interviewing and observation as a way to "investigate, in a fine-grained way, the complex interrelationships between individuals and their social, material, and symbolic contexts" (Levy & Hollan, 2014, p.

313). It is first and foremost concerned with opening up opportunities for participants to talk about their experiences in social contexts but also for the interviewer to observe “when an interviewee actually becomes elated, anxious, hopefully, frightened, and so on while discussing certain topics or experiences” (p. 314). Levy and Hollan explain how this opens up a new space for study:

> Person-centered interviews also engage the interviewee as a ‘respondent,’ as an object of systematic study and observation in him- or herself. The interviewer observes and studies the interviewee as he or she behaves in the interview setting, as he or she reacts or responds to various probes, questions, and topics” (p. 216). Levy and Hollan provide a practical example:
> Person-centered interviewing moves back and forth between the informant and the respondent modes. A remark of a young woman informant: “I felt shy and embarrassed at that time” might be followed by a respondent-type probe: “Tell me more about how you felt,” or by the informant-type questions…These oscillations between respondent and informant modes illuminate the spaces, conflicts, coherences, and transformations, if any, between the woman-in-herself (either in her own conception, or in the interviewer’s emerging one) and aspects of her perception and understanding of her external context of life-world…
> Person-centered interviewing *generates* a field of new phenomena, of reports and behaviors, that are then subject to interpretation” (p. 317)

The draw of this methodology to a study with an Islamic paradigm is two-fold: It invites participants to elaborate freely about their relationships with the social, material, and symbolic world, as Levy and Hollan emphasize, while also allowing observation of the combined heart-mind faculty discussed earlier. If the heart-mind is where intellect, consciousness, and emotion is housed, then paying close attention to participants’ language, cadence, and emotions can reveal much about this faculty. This necessitates a shift in what is considered a “protocol” for

an interview, as these moves between interviewer and participant must be made in real time during the conversation itself. I will explain this in more detail as I introduce the study in full.

Procedures

The eligibility criteria for this study were the following: 1) Identified as both an Arab American and Muslim, 2) were between the ages of 20-24, and 3) live anywhere in the U.S. A flyer was distributed through social media, contacts in community organizations, and university student groups. I recruited 20 individuals and invited them to participate in up to three interviews about how they make meaning around their identities as Arab American Muslims. Participants were told that they would be invited to participate in up to three interviews about the identities they hold, formative experiences that led to tensions or contradictions, and any relevant reflections between conversations about themselves and their ways of being / becoming. Participants were also informed that they would be given a $15 Amazon gift card after each interview. Ultimately, 15 individuals agreed to be participants in the study. Each participant reviewed a consent form sent to them via email and were asked if they had any questions. All agreed to participate in the interview through written affirmation in an email or text message. Additionally, all participants consented to audio and video recording in a quiet, private space. This study was approved by UCLA IRB #22-001827.

Participants

Participants had families that represented nine countries in the Arab world: Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, and Sudan. Appendix A lists the background of the participants. In general, the vast majority of participants were either undergraduate or graduate students spanning all regions of the United States, with the East Coast, West Coast, and Midwest roughly equally represented. One participant was from the South and

another was from the Southeast. One of the participants explained that she has split her time between the East Coast and Morocco recently due to visa issues. Some participants were living with their family and others were living on their own — a detail that I include here because it is an important context for discussion about possibility-making later. All participants reported that their socioeconomic status was middle class.

Participant Interviews

Nearly all participants were interviewed three times, with the exception of one participant who was only interviewed twice due to becoming extremely busy with community organizing work after the events of October 7th in Palestine. The first round of interviews occurred between May and August 2023; the second round began in September and concluded in December; and the last round of interviews began in January 2024 and were largely completed in February 2024. Some participants sent voice notes or text messages between data collection points with follow-up thoughts. Although data collection officially concluded in early Spring, some participants continued to send voice notes or text messages with their reflections, particularly after large-scale student protests in support of Palestine erupted in mid-March 2024. Due to time constraints, some but not all of these reflections collected after March 2024 were coded and included in the data as well. Future directions include completing the coding and continuing analysis with these voice notes and messages.

Committed to person-centered interviewing, what is understood to be as a conventional "interview protocol" in developmental science took on a different form in this study. Protocols were developed in advance for each of the three interviews with general topics that would elicit conversation about their upbringing, family, schooling, friendships, and spirituality. However, much improvisation occurred during the interview itself to not only deepen the conversation (e.g.

“Can you tell me more about that?”) but also to name emotions, reactions, or hesitations that were occurring in real time and ask the participants about these observations. An example of this is this exchange between Ahmed and myself during his second interview:

> Ahmed: I never reacted poorly, I’ve always been supportive, but at that point what that person did was very wrong. I don’t know if it’s jealousy, heartbreak, or confusion…it’s upsetting but I also feel like I shouldn’t be feeling this way.
>
> Asil: If you could pinpoint a feeling besides “upsetting”, what is it? What’s the feeling?
>
> Ahmed: I think it’s regret? On her behalf? But that feels like I am controlling her. I don’t like language, it’s always too limited. I just don’t know. It doesn’t make sense.
>
> Asil: It doesn’t have to make sense. You just can explore it, just play with it, see whatever comes up —
>
> Ahmed: — I feel like whenever I say something, I’m contradicting myself. The feelings I have are weird. I have this imagery in my mind of what college is supposed to be like, of what romantic partners are supposed to be like…I’m realizing I have this sort of savior complex, and I can share a bit more about the girl I was dating…

These questions were not in the interview protocol, nor were they focused on simply eliciting more content about the story at hand, which was about a relationship that had recently ended for Ahmed. Instead, the turns were more interested in the ways this participant was struggling to create language and how that revealed a deeper tension within himself, which was his discomfort with the idea of “I’m contradicting myself.” I provide this example to illustrate that the interview protocols were loosely followed as a guide to prompt conversation but that much of the conversation emerged out of an organic oscillation between myself and the interviewee. For the most part, each interview truly felt like a conversation.

Another testament to the oscillating nature of these conversations came from Mourad, who closed out our last interview with this comment:

> I think these have been really healing for me. I didn't agree to this [study] thinking it would be as impactful as they were. I was very much expecting you to ask me very surface level questions...but no, you actually had created a space where I could be seen. And then you saw me. And then you continue to see me. And that's not something I'm used to. So you have made a commitment to understanding me and I have an utmost gratitude towards you for that. So thank you so much for that. Thank you for seeing me.
>
> — Mourad

I humbly and hesitantly include this quote above. I am not accustomed to such accolades and I certainly don't enjoy tooting my own horn. However, Mourad's reflection surprised me. *Is that all it takes?* I wrote in a memo after this conversation. *Are people just really needing that type of space? That shouldn't surprise me, but perhaps it does.*

Additionally, because of evolving social and political contexts in 2023 through 2024 (e.g. the genocide in Gaza, continued repression of pro-Palestine speech in the U.S., additional turbulence on university campuses), the protocol developed in advance for the three interviews were edited at the beginning of each round of interviews. By the end of the first round, I observed that participants wanted to speak less about their identity in abstract terms and wanted to offer more examples of experiences where tensions or contradictions surfaced. The second protocol was thus revised to allow for that. However, October 7th and the subsequent attacks on Gaza occurred in the middle of the second round of interviews and I sensed that participants were eager to talk about the impact this has had on them. The protocol was already focused on tensions and contradictions, which meant that there was ample room for participants to discuss this. Nevertheless, I adjusted the protocol to explicitly ask participants for their thoughts on this emerging genocide in Gaza. The third protocol was adjusted in late December when I was

reviewing memos and recognizing that participants had much to say about tensions they felt as they navigated difficult circumstances. In the second round of interviews, all participants discussed traversing and building solidarity amongst various groups, increased police presence and repression, and the impact of continuing to witness photos and videos of state-sponsored violence. Thus, the protocol for the third round of interviews was adjusted to allow more room for participants to discuss these experiences as well as space to discuss the emotional experiences they had since we first began this study in Spring 2023. This last point was what gave birth to a major finding that will be discussed later: that participants engage and find grounding in life-affirming orientations grounded in Islam that have emboldened them to traverse personal, social, and political upheaval throughout the ten months that we had been in contact.

Data Analysis Process

Interviews were initially uploaded and transcribed with the aid of Otter.ai. The transcriptions were immediately uploaded to Dedoose — a qualitative research analysis software — and the initial recording and transcriptions on Otter.ai were destroyed (Dedoose, 2021). Participants' real names were not used in this study but instead matched with pseudonyms that were agreed upon between myself and the participants.

Qualitative research emphasizes focusing on the meaning participants attach to their words and observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To most effectively understand the meaning Arab American Muslim youth ascribe to identity in this study, I analyzed the data through three stages: (1) Building intimacy with the transcripts and documents, (2) Developing and applying codes to the data through an inductive-deductive approach, and (3) Finalizing and reflecting on themes that have emerged from the data with participants.

Stage 1: Building intimacy with transcripts and documents

First, I familiarized myself with the data by reading the entirety of the transcript from each interview multiple times. This ultimately allowed for as much proximity as possible to the participants' actual words and creations. Ultimately, this practice of reading transcripts multiple times in an unstructured way advanced a more holistic understanding of both my participants and their words (Saldaña, 2013).

Stage 2: Code development

The second stage of data analysis worked towards developing and applying codes to the interview excerpts of interest to this study. Developing codes is an iterative, inductive-deductive process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2013). The inductive process required reading the transcripts several times again, in addition to the close readings completed in the first stage. To be more specific, I employed descriptive coding, an approach that allowed the data to speak for itself and attends to what particular ideas are emerging repeatedly across interviews. It was crucial to also document the thoughts that perhaps appear less frequently but still directly respond to the question at hand, as well as noting responses that are off-topic (Saldaña, 2013). Here, it was important to remain low on the ladder of inference to preserve the participants' meaning-making as much as possible (Saldaña, 2013). This process resulted in an initial array of codes, defined as categories that can be applied to the transcripts that will ultimately be analyzed to determine themes and answer this study's research questions.

Once an initial sketch of codes was developed, I deductively approached the transcripts again and attempted to apply to codes to determine if they adequately "fit" or represent the varied responses across participants. During this process, I noted if codes seem too broad, too narrow, or too abstract with the intention of refining the codebook. Specifically, some codes were merged, others were parsed out into sub-codes, and some were disposed of all together if they no

longer meaningfully explained the data. The process was repeated as needed to arrive at a final set of codes. I often checked in with myself throughout this process with a single question: Am I inferring too much? Am I inferring too little? What does the data actually say? Once a final codebook was developed, I applied these codes to the excerpts across all the transcripts.

Stage 3: Finalizing and reflecting on themes with participants

The process of developing and applying codes to the transcript excerpts was in service of ultimately moving from an immense amount of transcript data to more abstract but meaningful units that could ultimately be analyzed to answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2013). Once I applied the codes, I prepared a detailed spreadsheet to track the codes applied to the interviews and to calculate frequencies of each code generally and across different age groups. Ultimately, this spreadsheet allowed me to observe patterns and anomalies across the data to determine themes that will be used to answer the research aims. By investigating which codes appeared frequently and which appeared less frequently, I returned to the transcripts to re-read particular excerpts to further develop nuance in the themes. Because this is reflective work, I shared the emerging themes with the participants and invited them to share their general feedback if they felt moved to. Participants were encouraged to comment on whether these themes align with what they also observed throughout nearly the year of conversation together, making note of what can be merged, deleted, or re-considered completely. Many participants noted how spirituality emerged frequently in conversation, in both subtle and obvious ways, which was immensely helpful in thinking through the emerging themes.

Phenomena from a qualitative research study

I now turn to three observations about this qualitative process that emerged during this process. These are not data in themselves but rather fascinating and revealing phenomena that

are worth pursuing as future study. The three phenomena that emerged were hesitations around vocabulary, maintaining an anti-policing stance, and the shift after October 7th.

Hesitations around vocabulary

It should be noted that the beginning of recruitment revealed much about how complicated the terms "Arab", "American" and "Muslim" were. Once posted on a public social media account, I began to receive private messages like the following: "What do you mean by Muslim?", "Do I have to be practicing, like praying and fasting, to participate in the study?", "My relationship with Islam right now is very complicated and confusing, I don't know if I'm a good fit." My responses were not too varied to each individual. To the individual from the last quote I said: "I understand that. If you feel compelled to make this study a space where you want to explore the complicated and confusing parts of this aloud with someone, I'd love to welcome you to this study! But if that doesn't feel good at the moment, I completely understand." The individual ultimately declined to participate in the study. To the former two questions, I responded with: "I do not have a definition of who 'practices' and who doesn't. I'm curious about your experiences as someone who has some relationship to Islam. The conversations will have plenty of room for you to be explore this openly. I, too, have a relationship to Islam that is complex." I opted to add this last sentence of self-disclosure as an affirmation that these questions about spirituality are normative. These two participants did opt into the study. Even the individuals who did not pause around the word "Muslim" explained during our conversations that their relationship to the spirituality was sometimes fraught or that they had questions about how it is practiced or policed in their communities.

In addition to the word "Muslim", the word "American" prompted questions from Lana, who currently resides with family Morocco due to visa issues after she graduated from college

and lost her student visa status. However, she felt compelled to join the study because she had spent many years in the U.S. Similarly, the word “Arab” prompted hesitation from Nadia, not because she did not actually consider herself as an Arab but because she also identified as Black and named that this identity was an important one to her as well.

These hesitations about vocabulary point to perhaps one of the most important take-aways from this study that will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. Simply put, words are not sufficient to describe what makes someone *who they are.* This was the main thrust of the dissertation study in the first place — to go much deeper than vocabulary and liberal constructions of categories of people. Many participants later asked questions along the lines of “What does this word even mean?”. Identifying as Arab is easier for some than others, but for all, acknowledging the word is an important exercise but there was an eagerness to go much deeper, to describe the myriad of experiences, including some that contradict each other.

An anti-policing interview stance

This brings me to my second note about methods: People were very eager to speak, and to have the freedom to speak about whatever topics they felt were relevant. I designed the interviews to allow for this. It felt like an important methodological consideration — how is a participant supposed to understand the holistic self when being constantly redirected by me, the researcher, to talk about what I deem important? But this was also designed as a counterweight to what many participants and I feel in daily life outside of this Zoom screen: A need to police ourselves, to perform in particular ways in many spaces dictated by norms of whiteness and the culture of capitalism. Nadine Naber (2014) described this phenomenon amongst Arab Americans as the “internment of the psyche” (p. 1112), or the “internal incarceration or collective sense of fear of the police state”. It felt important, healing, and instinctively *right* to create a protocol that

addressed important axes of consideration of the self but to hold the interviews loosely. Moreover, this allowed for emotion to fill the Zoom screen, and if not emotion, then hesitation, curiosity, and uncertainty. This became increasingly important after the events of October 7th.

A shift in October

Participants and I were largely completing our second round of interviews when the events of October 7th took place and it was becoming clear that the Israeli response was leading to genocide. It was clear that there needed to be an intentional shift in the way the protocol was structured but also in the way the interviews were conducted. Not just because some of my participants were Palestinian but also because I, myself, felt a shift. I could not immediately assume that my participants felt the same way I did, but it was worth allowing for that possibility. I needed to ask.

I observed that the heart of this shift was the verbs my participants were using: my participants were *doing* many things. They were participating in protests, debates, and encampments, to name a few. I, too, was participating in protests, debates, and encampments. It felt important to name this to each other — that the interviewer and the participant were wrapped up in a sociopolitical space that prompted us to engage in the world in very similar ways. A poignant example of this occurred in April 2024, well after data collection formally ended. I was laying in my tent at the UCLA encampment — before it was swept by police on the night of May 1, 2024 — checking messages on my phone before falling asleep. A participant sends me a message on WhatsApp. "Hey Asil, I hope you're doing well. I have a lot of thoughts I want to share. I'm currently at my encampment and am just thinking about so much." I remember my mouth gaping open in shock, and then bursting into a smile. "Yes!!!" I typed back immediately. "I'd love to hear them!" The participant then sent me over two dozen consecutive voice notes

reflecting on his experience in his own encampment. Due to time constraints, these voice notes will be transcribed and analyzed for a future study but are unfortunately not included in this one. As he reflected on his day at the encampment and all the activities he helped pull together — a small group for studying texts, a food table, the people's library — I was reminded that for all of the participants interviewed, being a person in the world was synonymous with becoming a person in this world. And that both of us were here together, relating to each other, relating to this evolving world from our respective tents.

Results

The results below will be organized to demonstrate three life-affirming acts that participants practice: 1) legibility, 2) refusal, and 3) revolutionary optimism. It should be said that these are not mutually exclusive amongst participants at all — all of them indicated that they engaged in at least two of them, and the vast majority of participants engaged in all three. A take-away, then, is that participants discern time, place, and context in deciding what feels most life-affirming in the moment.

Rendering legibility

> *Americans think you're a terrorist. Arabs think you're a fed.*
> *Men think you're a feminist. Women think you're a misogynist.*
> *Leftists think you're a fanatic. Fanatics think you're a leftist.*
> *Sunnis think you're an extremist. Shias think you're an apologist.*
> *Academics don't take you seriously. Laymen take you too seriously.*
> *Traditionalists think you're a formalist. Reformers think you're a traditionalist. Jurists think you're a deviant. Mystics think you're a dogmatist. Mom wishes she could help. Dad wishes he could understand. Hassan is dead. — a poem by Mourad*

The first major finding of this study is that participants were conscious of the fact that they were not legible to many others but sometimes desired to be so. Here, I use the term legibility to describe the phenomenon in which a person can be "read" by others to be

understandable according to dominant norms. For example, scholars of gender and sexuality write about legibility extensively to describe the ways cis-heteronormativity has signaled those who are queer as "illegible" by society at large, despite recent changes in public perception to queerness (Cisneros & Gutierrez, 2018). Mourad's poem above mirrors similar sentiments across many participants but also primes us to think about the associated act: an attempt to become legible. I argue that this *can* be a life-affirming act. At first, it may seem counterintuitive but when framed as a way for participants to survive and navigate hegemonic power, it can be understood not as a cowardly act but rather as a way through overbearing circumstances and systems that demand much of them. Rendering one's self as legible, then, is a tool rather than a solution. The hope is that this act is one of many tools they can exercise — some moments and circumstances may simply just call for it. For some participants, this may be a temporary fix. For others, they may engage in this for a while — this is only for them to decide. Participants rendered themselves legible in two different ways: by concealing and by shape-shifting.

Concealing

Many participants described concealing themselves from two entities: their families and the state. Ehab admitted that he often hides parts of his life from his religious family. At the start of the study, he shared that "nobody in my family knows that [I have a girlfriend], other than my brothers who know everything about me…the Muslim community at large and my family have a different perception of me." He shares that he was "angsty" doing this and "started to distance myself slowly, which was a little bit painful" to alleviate the inner tensions that he felt. As we continued speaking about this throughout the course of the interviews, he began to reveal more and more about himself to his family. In looking back on his act of concealing, he reflects that he

“didn’t feel that my relationships with these people were contingent on religion” but that he often found himself lying or “keep[ing] up an image.” He adds: “It is pragmatic.”

Ghaliah also practiced some concealment out of pragmatism as well. She moved to the West Coast for school and often calls her parents in New Jersey, but strategically. “I call my mom every single day…but I will make sure to do it in the morning before I go out. Or if I’m in the car on the way to places so that I don’t get a call while I’m at a hangout.” Ghaliah explains that her parents do not approve of social settings where genders are mixed, but to Ghaliah “I’ve decided that it’s okay.” Additionally, it was through one of these social events that she found her partner and has been dating him quietly for nearly two years now. Ghaliah describes that she acts in ways “that minimize their [her parents’] suspicion” and employs “lying so I can be a bit fugitive so that I can have the safety to explore.” This is reminiscent of Fred Moten’s ideas of fugitivity, where he argues in his book *Stolen Life* that “Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always improper voice or instrument” (Moten, p. 49, 2018). “I’m a horrible liar,” Ghaliah adds before pausing. “I’m planning on going to North Carolina for a wedding…it’s going to be suspicious but I want to go.” When I asked in our final conversation how the fugitive communications around her trip went, she sighed and remarked that it was “stressful” having to lie and cover up her where-abouts and finding quiet spaces to talk where background noise would not be easily picked up. Another participant, Nisrine, also took advantage of her move to the West Coast to quietly date. Typically, her parents want to know every detail of her dating life, but now that she is alone in California, she is able to spend time with people without her parents necessarily knowing. Nisrine and Ghaliah both made it clear, however, that even in dating they still uphold

values that they feel like are important to them (e.g. no pre-marital sex). Distance, however, is seen by these participants as a gift that has made concealing their acts — and thus exploring new opportunities — easier.

Distance has also worked at one point in Lana's favor as she was exploring her sexuality. She is back in her home country of Morocco now, but first realized that she is a lesbian when she was studying in the United States. The distance between Morocco and the United States helped her "explore and figure out what I like" away from the watchful eyes of her parents. However, she built the courage to explain her sexuality to her mom but was met with some resistance. "I've sort of stopped having those conversations with her," Lana says. "She says like 'You're an adult, you do whatever you want' kind of thing. But there's always an undertone of aggressiveness with that. There isn't really this peaceful acceptance of it…it still messes with my head." Lana shares that despite some openings to converse with her mom about this, it was "easier pragmatically" to stop all conversation about the topic all together.

In addition to many other examples of participants concealing their activities — particularly around dating and sexuality — they described that they also concealed their emotions. This was most evident with Talia, who describes that her "coping mechanism" for a host of stressful situations in her family is "underplaying everything I go through and acting like it's normal…And I'm very logical about things. I don't give a shit about what I'm feeling inside." She often defaults to this when she sees her parents in distress. It is unusual for Talia to see her dad cry, but she describes a day on their way to school where he needed to vent. "I was just listening, I didn't want to say anything until he finished because I wanted him to continue and let it out. But I was telling myself 'Don't cry, don't cry' even though I was getting emotional too." She describes that in subsequent car rides "I have to emotionally prepare myself, like okay,

therapy time. And then he'll vent a bit…being the older daughter, you have to take a lot of the emotional baggage from your parents. You know? That's just part of the job."

Even during my conversations with Talia, I pointed out that I could see her actively reigning in her emotions and defaulting to logic or cutting a story short — a comment that felt difficult to share on my end, but felt fruitful to point out to deepen the conversation around her acts of concealment. "I agree," she says and then starts rummaging through her desk. She pulls out an emotion wheel, a paper tool that has dozens of words printed on it describing a range of emotions. She turns it clockwise in her hand, looking for the right word to describe what prompts this phenomenon of hiding her emotions. "I don't know if it's fearful…Um, let's narrow it down. Scared, anxious, insecure. Maybe insecure. Inferior? No. I don't know…Oh! Exposed? Like vulnerability. Maybe that? Yeah, okay, so maybe like a mix of vulnerability, feeling inferior, inadequate, and exposed. That's how I feel, that's why I try to hold it all in." She sits back and sighs as she puts the wheel down on her desk and swivels around in her office chair.

Mourad also admitted to concealing his emotions as a way to fulfill a role he fell into in his family. As a result of feeling "different" and "weird" at school, he "resorted to a lot of isolation." He explains that he "became very self reliant emotionally, and because of that, I presented a level of self reliance emotionally to my family. So whenever there would be friction within the family, I became a sort of mediator. And so I became relied upon in that sense." Mourad says that at first, the role was gratifying but then he realized that he couldn't "be everything for everyone" and that he often felt like a "failure" for not being able to contribute anything more. This prompted a new journey of understanding himself, which will be discussed later in the conversation about revolutionary optimism.

The second entity participants conceal themselves from is the state. This should be no surprise, especially given the extensive documentation of the post-September 11th Arab and Muslim Americans heavily engaged in this within the heightened police state (Beydoun, 2014). Participants began speaking about this with me well before the events of October 7th but this became a recurring conversation with every participant after October 7th. Sami received guidance from his mom, who "told me not to share anything on Twitter, or if you talk with people here in America…just be diplomatic." Sami and his family had previously lived in France, a country he describes as "crazy Islamophobic" and whose policies and culture greatly impacted his family's outward presentations. In addition to avoiding speaking in Arabic in public in France, he recalls that his mom would wear a hat in France instead of the traditional headscarf "for her own safety". He recalls that his "parents were more careful than me" but ultimately remembers that "the culture and the laws suffocate you. If you want to assimilate, you'd have to hide a lot of stuff about your identity, most of your religion, and I'd say your links to the Arab world." When I asked if he still feels this way in the United States, he paused and pondered a bit. "Yes, definitely. But France is just worse. But it's the same here, just a different flavor." Some other participants expressed that they are self-censoring themselves out of fear of state repression but interestingly they were in the minority.

Ramy and Hanan both described themselves as "social media warriors", describing that they have been posting constantly on Instagram to raise awareness about the genocide in Gaza. The fear they both share, however, was more about the physical space than the digital space. Hanan describes that she "only comes to campus when I have class, and then I immediately go back home" due to increased surveillance of pro-Palestine students on campus as well as attempts by Zionist individuals and groups to dox students, claiming that they are anti-semitic.

Ramy also shares that he “doesn’t say anything when I go to work” but will quietly type away on his Instagram, understanding that it is still risky but is somehow more “comfortable” speaking in this space. “Things are crazy on campus too,” he adds in a voicenote in early May 2024. “I don’t feel comfortable walking around. There’s a lot of surveillance, people taking pictures and trying to smear you for being pro-Palestine. Normally I wouldn’t care but this is next level and I have to think about a lot of my future. I’m applying to PhD programs right now.” Ramy is referring to the increased surveillance and policing many campuses invested in after students began protesting with encampments.

Maissa had less to say about her own concealment from the state and outside agitators but offered a reflection on her mixed feelings about people who do conceal themselves. She began by observing that the vast majority of Muslim students on her campus “self-segregate” into majority-Muslim dorms, friendships, and organizations. “Their entire social life revolves around friendships with other Muslim people,” she says with an air of frustration. She wondered aloud:

> Are you doing this out of protection? Are you scared of interacting with other people out of safety because if my only other friends are Muslim, then I’m at a 0% risk of being discriminated against based on my faith. So this feels like a safer community for me to be in. And in that sense, I'm like, Fine, okay, I respect it. It's not really harming anyone. But then at the same time…why aren’t they open to meeting new people? And then in addition, they're like, ‘Oh, people have such negative views of Islam’. And I'm like, Well, of course. You're not willing to go out and talk to other people and be like, ‘Oh, hi, by the way, I'm Muslim.’ So if you continue with this attitude of only being friends with their Muslims, then obviously we're not going to progress. Yeah, we're not going to integrate into the larger American society, we're gonna be denying ourselves opportunities and privileges that we wouldn't be getting if we were building these alliances, across, you know, across ethnicity, across race across religion. So that's something that's always stumped me, but I do think a big part of that is the trauma in our community.

"Do you know what I'm referring to?" she asks after her reference to the trauma in their community. I nod, remembering the jarring headlines from several years ago. "I guess it's completely fair to be living on this campus, trying to be close to your people, because you know that less than ten years ago someone who looked like and talked like you was killed for it." In this case, Maissa was able to hold what she calls "multiple truths" about the experience of being a Muslim on their college campus but repeatedly criticized Muslim students' attempts at being insular and "hiding away" from others.

Ahmed agrees that we must have immense clarity about the fact that the state — and by extension, the university — is a threat to many young Arabs and Muslims. He turns to another sphere, however, and cautions that he is witnessing that some communities "solidify their identity" by perpetuating a narrative about their victimization. "Having an enemy's exciting, the diaspora gets to have a little narrative, a little storyline in their head. It's fine. It gives you a sense of not just community but also of purpose. But I think it's a dumb part of identity to hold onto. You have to dissect to find that the reason [for victimizing themselves] is actually quite weak." He is speaking specifically about a minoritized group in Syria that his family belongs to — the Alawis — who have indeed been persecuted. However, Ahmed is "really curious to hear if any of that is actually happening in diaspora, like can anyone actually tell me about an experience where they felt threatened by Sunnis in the United States?" The result, he argues, is that people "alienate themselves from a major part of the Syrian community" which he says weakens the general Syrian community, which already "must deal with so much from the U.S empire already."

Ehab also shares the sentiment that some Muslims engage in a victimization, which he knows "is not completely made up, of course" but "there's this doubling down where Muslims in

America feel themselves to be the odd one out, they become more conservative, they become more insular, and it reinforces the entire feeling of being marginalized." He adds, however, "but I can sympathize with why people do this."

Shape-shifting

While concealment is about actively hiding parts of the self, shape-shifting emerged as a way participants would perform other parts of themselves to make themselves legible. If concealment can be thought of hiding, then shape-shifting can be thought as being like a chameleon and blending in. Lana very clearly stated this: "I don't have a choice but to show up differently in different settings for survival purposes," referring specifically to "feeling like I need to be accepted" by a variety of people including her parents, friends, and tennis peers. She realized that "this is why I like theater because it makes me reflect on which parts of me feel most authentic." Nisrine also recalls shape-shifting as a child who switched schools multiple times due to her family's moves between Egypt and the U.S. "I got very good at getting people to open up very quickly or being comfortable with me right away," she says. "My first goal is to make people comfortable, and then I'll be comfortable." She did this both in Egypt and in the U.S., where she felt like she "didn't fit in" completely in either space for being "too Egyptian" or "too American", respectively.

Maissa also felt like she had a "split identity", stating that she did not feel "really Muslim nor really Arab" growing up in the southeastern part of the United States. She admits that "a part of me does all these extracurricular activities [e.g. leading the Arab Student Association on campus] in order to kind of dispel any narrative of me not being Muslim enough or Arab enough." She shares that "I've been very intentional about having both Arab spaces and American or white spaces and just having a foot in both doors." When I asked why that is

important to her she discussed the need for comfort: “I know that's something valuable. But again, at the end of the day, I want to feel more comfortable in both spaces, so I need to open myself up to spending time im both spaces.” This split identity is also felt by Nadia — a Sudanese American — but she seems to navigate multiple spaces with the understanding that she will not feel the same way in each one. “I’m being very transparent with you,” she tells me after some brief comments about being Black and Arab. She describes her experience shape-shifting:

> I like the African student group more. Low key I feel more welcomed. They were a very diverse group and the other groups [Arab and Muslim student groups] have nice people but I don’t feel like you can be yourself around them…Islam is a big thing to me, it keeps me grounded….and I can have a foundation with others about what’s right, what’s wrong, and it’s easy to get along with them on those terms because we share a lot of the same beliefs. With the Africans, we actually wouldn’t share a lot of the same beliefs. So there’s also a limit with both. I’ll be hanging out with the Africans, for example, and then they’ll go clubbing and stuff, and I’m like, alright, it’s time for me to go. And maybe I’ll go see what the Arabs or Muslims are up to.

Nadia speaks about this form of shape-shifting as if it is a matter of fact, indicating that she has built some comfort with this life-affirming act. She attributes this to a realization she had about how culture can be diluted over time. “So I want you to picture my family as losing printer ink,” she tells me. “You know you’re printing paper and as it goes from my dad to my little brother, that cultural identity is fading just a bit.” Her membership in these student organizations, she says, is her attempt at preserving connections to both her African and her Arab heritage. In turn, it allows her to shape-shift as she becomes what she calls “more fluent” in multiple communities and cultures she subscribes to.

Others also desire this ability to shape-shift and be legibile to multiple communities, but often run into resistance. Nearly half of the participants shared that when they would shape-shift

to fit one community, they often felt like they lost footing in another community or would be surprised with what met them. Nadia talked about how she hated her curly hair but has recently learned to embrace it. “But if I go to an event with curly hair, my cousins are like ‘Why is your hair so messy?’ And I just don’t know what to say to that.” Hanan also described feeling puzzled. She shared that a few trips back to her family’s homeland of Egypt was “Earth shattering” because she realized that much of what she regularly practices as a Muslim “people don’t necessarily do over there.” The example she provided was about the call to prayer. Typically, Muslims are encouraged to heed the call as soon as it happens and get up to pray, no matter what they are doing. “Nobody moved,” Hanan said to me, wide-eyed. “I was the only one who got off the couch, and they all looked at me like ‘What are you doing?’. It’s crazy because I’m the American one here! I just assumed they would be just as religious as me, if not more.” She added later that “my cousins always made fun of us” precisely for this reason. Maissa also felt a schism between herself and the Muslim community in the U.S. and felt like she “couldn’t wrap my head around” this. In Tunisia, she explains, “there’s more openness and what you’re wearing doesn’t define if you’re a Muslim or not, there’s like bars and people mix and socialize freely. And they’re not any less Muslim because of it. The Islam here is different. The segregated gender events, and nobody is dancing, and there’s no music. In Tunisia, heritage and religion are synonymous. There isn’t like this distinct boundary,” she describes. “I don’t really know how to deal with that, it’s hard for me to shift completely into those spaces.”

Fascinatingly, while most participants engaged in shape-shifting in some form, most wanted to talk about the *limits* of shape-shifting instead. Talia describes an experience with a therapist:

> She was fine. And I thought it would be great because she was a Black, middle aged woman. I thought she would have great

> cultural sensitivity. No. She suggested “If your house is so toxic, why don't you just move out? I explained to her that that’s not an option, I just can’t do that. She was like, ‘Why can't you just say no? Like, what's the problem here?’ I told her that I'm an Arab woman. If I move out of the house before I'm married — are you kidding me? Not only will my father disown me, but this whole community would disown me too. You know what I mean? She just didn't get it.

Talia later shared that she quit attending therapy because of this inability to explain to her therapist that there were some expectations she could not ignore or refuse. Unfortunately, her symptoms of depression and anxiety worsened. Physical symptoms emerged for Nadia as well as she described her difficulty shape-shifting. She shared that she developed an eating disorder in high school, likely as a result of the pressures of trying to assimilate to an environment with Western, white beauty standards. “I remember I would always journal, ‘I just want to be skinny’ and I had a lot of emotions about this. I was so distracted with basketball and friends that I never really realized the eating disorder was a problem until I got a problem. I lost my period, it just wasn’t coming. I wasn’t good. So that’s when the self care journey started. I was like, ‘Alright, I need to accept myself. How can I grow to like myself?’” Nadia’s inability to literally *physically* shape-shift necessitated a realization that perhaps this act was not life-affirming at all, that it would only worsen her illness.

The limits of shape-shifting are commented on by Jamila as well. She observes that fitting into dominant American culture is “a common trajectory” for Arabs and Muslims because they believe “they end up with a job or quote ‘civil rights’. But I’m like, what civil rights? What are you actually fighting for? What do you actually want? You know, do you want Muslims to be able to fit into this facade of a country? Like is this it?” Jamila’s cynicism is shared with Mourad, who zooms out to discuss group dynamics more generally:

> I think people are better at being friends with each other than I am. I think it has to do with what we're willing to give within a group in order to be a part of that group. I just don't have as much of a tolerance for that as other people do. And then for me to try and enact that tolerance comes at a heavy cost to my own well being. And so I become very torn between, do I martyr myself to be a part of a circle of people so that I can be I can feel that communal feeling of acceptance that I so desire? Or do I try to hone in on my agency and create a schism, create friction within the group and then once again, fall back into that self fulfilling prophecy: "Oh, I'm the weird one, I'm the victim, I'm always going to be alone." I'm basically between a rock and a hard place. It's a double bind, as they say.

Mourad admits that he knows that he is free to move between groups or momentarily leave and return as he explores what it is like to acclimate to these groups of people. However, he steps back to elaborate on the entire process of shape-shifting:

> ..the simplest example is just being a child around other kids. And just the idea that I'm not them. And just being very conscious of that. It can be a little disorienting because you can't really forumate what it is you're feeling as a child, you don't really have the tools to identify that disconnect…but as you grow older, you come up with your own explanations, whether it be to comfort yourself or to sometimes even harm yourself. 'Well, I've always been weird.' Or 'I've always been strange' or 'Well, no, I've always been unique. I've always been this. So we start to have labels attributed to us from when we're young. And we either adopt them and build upon them, or we try to discard them and build new labels. But I don't know if the latter is healthier than the former, really, because I think you could be just as susceptible to stigmatizing yourself, as others were to stigmatize you. So that's a struggle that I deal with a lot. *Am I just swapping out one cage for another*?" (emphasis added)

Mourad's question has stayed with me for a while since he first uttered it and illustrated the main fallacy with rendering ourselves legible: While it may provide temporary relief, does it sustain us? Perhaps it allows us to maneuver throughout multiple spaces but ultimately, the

"cage" is still there. These last few participants argue that it is the cage that must be dealt with, not just our ability to squeeze in and out of its contours.

Refusal

> *"I find solace in the very act of resistance itself. I find victory in the very act of resistance. I find victory in the very act of discontent." — Mourad*

As indicated above, participants understand that attempts at becoming legible can only go so far. An important finding of this study is that many participants practiced some sort of refusal — of norms, systems, and expectations. Refusal is a life-affirming move: Most participants shared that there was something that they just could not stand for, that they would not continue entertaining. Participants were refusing both the material realities of systems of domination and control as well as the way these systems attempted to intrude into their psyches. In other words, young people understand that the systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and cis-heteropatriarchy were not just systems enacting material violence but psychic ones as well. These systems create ideas of what is "good" and "civil" and in essence create a binary that also defines what is "bad" and "uncivil". When participants refuse these, they are articulating that they are divesting *affectively and materially* from these systems. They refuse to be bound by the logics of these systems. In this section, I'll be sharing both the content of these refusals as well as the forms in which they took place. Some were statements, others were actual actions.

Refusal of performance

Many participants discussed that they were uninterested in continuing to perform according to the expectations of white supremacy, capitalism, and cis-heteropatriarchy. Maissa noted that when she visits family in Tunisia, she notices "more and more people wanting to be closer to whiteness, but also holding a disdain for Europe because of its colonial history." Still,

however, many Tunisians are "still invested" in markers of whiteness such as using hair relaxers. "It's everywhere in Tunisia, my mom and sister do it all the time." She refuses the treatments herself, though: "I am the only one who doesn't do it, I want to hold out on this and these markers on whiteness. You're not messing up my curly hair." Back in the U.S., Maissa also shares that whiteness sets an expectation of "how to look and be". She describes an experience with a classmate:

> I do feel more comfortable in [Arab] spaces. I noticed this when I invited a girl I just met…she brought up that she was feeling lost at [her university], not feeling like she's in community. She's Egyptian. So I was like, 'Yo, come hang out with us. It will be so fun.' And we're yelling and screaming and laughing loudly. It's just how we are. And she was just sitting there, baffled. And I said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, maybe we're giving you a bad impression.' But on our walk home, she turns to me and says 'I always feel like I'm too much in white spaces and that was the first time I was able to see people who look at me and be like, oh, this is normal. Like the way I communicate is normal, the way I'm screaming and yelling and passionate about all these things are an innate part of my heritage.' I told her yes, we practice this and you can join us. And that practice in itself is a form of resistance, right?

Maissa's testimony of how "baffled" her new friend was hints that there are young Arab American Muslims who may feel so alienated from their "innate part of [their] heritage" that when they see others practice these ways of being, it can be surprising to take in.

Maissa's invitation to reconnect with non-white cultural norms stands in contrast with Nadia's experience, where she was nudged to take on an Islamic norm when she was not quite ready to do so. Throughout our time together, I noticed that Nadia was eager to talk about examples of cis-heteropatriarchy in her life. During our first interview, she hinted that she had been developing a romantic interest in a man and despite the few details about him, it was clear that she was optimistic and excited about this budding relationship. Our second conversation had

a devastating update: she had realized that "this is not what's best for me". Nadia is an avid basketball player and often shares videos and photos of herself on the court on her Instagram page. She began receiving comments from him about the way she dressed, specifically about wearing skin-tight leggings. "When he made the leggings comments, I was kind of like, well, technically he's right, because I get that you shouldn't be wearing tight clothes as a Muslim. But at the same time, we're allowed to be on this journey, I'm allowed to figure this out on my own without someone policing me. We don't have to change who we are as long as we're a good-hearted person, right?" Elsewhere, Nadia speaks at length about her journey in becoming closer to her faith. She makes it clear here, however, that her commitment is not to what other people tell her to value but what she finds valuable as it emerges on her own journey. In this way, Nadia is articulating that she refuses to alienate a part of herself — the way she dresses — in favor of becoming close to someone else.

The men of this study also pushed back against ideas of cis-heteropatriarchy and the expectations imparted on them as men. Mourad points out that he believes men should have "both sensitivity, tenderness, gentleness, softness but they are so heavily fixated on the rigor, strength, stoicism, and forbearance." He explicitly says "I am trying to strike a balance between the two, and rejecting any pressures to demonize the parts of myself that are tender and sweet." Ramy is notably disturbed by what he refers to as "red pill Muslim culture that has nothing to do Islam," advanced by public figures such as Andrew Tate. "That's not how Islam works," he says. "My role as a man is to not belittle people or using masculinity as an agenda for furthering misogyny." He spent much of our second conversation reflecting on his learnings from a painful breakup. "I've typically been more emotionally available than some women, and that depends on each person's upbringing. But the guy is expected to be the opposite. We're supposed to fix

things but we can’t have emotions too? I refuse that. I value talking about my feelings. It’s key in communication. I will stay up all night and talk about my emotions to you. My dad and brothers are not people who express emotion at all, so I had to learn this. But I will never go back.”

Outside of cis-heteropatriarchal expectations, participants spoke more generally about the civility politics they feel upheld by. This is visited in Mourad’s story about attending a panel at a political event in Spring 2024:

> One of the speakers had good intentions, but in the middle of her speech advocating for peace and justice, she had condemned Hamas’ actions on October 7th and then started sharing details from that day that have been repeatedly debunked by independent investigations. Immediately there was a reaction from audience members saying, ‘Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, a lot of this is misconstrued. Israel has literally admitted to killing their own citizens.’ And there was quite an uproar. Then a white woman from the audience just starting yelling at them: ‘Stop, stop, stop.’ The speaker on the stage just continued. I remember talking with my friend in the car later and he shared that he doesn’t disagree with the audience members who erupted, but argued that we have to maintain a certain level of decorum. I said, ‘Decorum? Decorum while someone is spitting lies? Yes, this is a space where everyone’s chanting and yelling, but what’s wrong with that when we all happen to agree with each other that her premise was bad.’ Let’s be honest, we were all thinking the same thing, they just had the courage to say it. So we all join them in the truth when it’s easy. But a lot of us succumb to decorum.

Later, Mourad recalls a historic and heavily publicized moment where refusal was practiced and decorum was intentionally violated. In 2008, Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at President George W. Bush during a press conference while yelling in Arabic “This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, dog.” Mourad reflects on this act. “God bless him. He was so real for that. I mean, he could have yelled, he could have stormed out, he could have cursed, but no. He made a point with a shoe. He summarized on behalf of the entire Arab world

the attitude towards such behavior. The behavior of U.S. empire is beneath his shoes. Yes, the level of depravity, the level of entitlement, the level of chauvinism, the level of disgust was beneath his shoes quite literally. May Allah protect that man." Mourad adds that his admiration for al-Zaidi is not just about the act of defiance but about what he observes as "someone who is on a journey towards self-actualization and sincerity…Inshallah [God willing] we can all integrate the parts of ourselves that would allow us to stand in defiance of empire as fearlessly as this man did."

Refusal of epistemic disciplining and dilution

Participants described pressures to adjust what they know to be true — both material realities and subjective experiences. Jamila discusses how she intentionally holds back at a non-profit organization she works at because she knows that there will be pressure to dilute any discussion of Palestine. She describes the environment as one where "you can talk about the suffering but you can't talk about *why* they're suffering." She decides that she will "refuse to do anything, any work that is Palestine-specific — like programming or events — because I know it's not going to be what I want it to be or what it should be. And then I know I'm going to have to quit. I will quit."

Jamila doesn't share how others in her organization would view her if she talked about the structural conditions that lead to the suffering of Palestinians (i.e. settler colonialism), but Ehab explains that he is viewed as "crazy" for articulating his perspectives, particularly about resistance efforts:

> I've looked up some professors' Twitters and they say the craziest stuff. For example, they reshare posts about people who are encouraging others to raise money for the IOF…And we can't say our own slogans because they police them and say that 'from the river to the sea' means genocide. That's so racist. If we say anything positive about resistance in general — such as not

> judging how an oppressed people behave — that's also too far. There has to be this complete utter condemnation of all forms of resistance, you have to believe in this right for Israel to exist. And we're just viewed as completely crazy for thinking otherwise.

Ehab here also reminds us that "because Hamas is a designated terrorist group, they [university administration] control the narrative" by suggesting that supporting terrorism is indeed a pathological, "crazy" choice while leaving out important context for resistance movements in Palestine. To be "viewed as completely crazy for thinking otherwise" is epistemological violence and a frustration shared by nearly all participants.

Sami speaks about this as well, albeit from a different angle. He made it clear from our first conversation that he is quite religious and is skeptical about some "liberal values in the public schools" in the U.S. When I asked him to elaborate, he explained that he doesn't think anyone would be "brainwashed to be pro-Israel" in the U.S. but that "I worry about some Western ideas, specifically LGBTQ stuff in my future kids' schools." He clarifies that "I don't care what my neighbor does but my kids are my responsibility…I don't want these ideas imposed on my kids or some of the more conservative communities. I just don't think it's fair." He knows that "I can't control what my kids believe when they grow up" but is highlighting that he is clearly bothered that public schools in the U.S. "force" ideas that are in opposition to his own beliefs.

Participants noted inconsistencies about what the U.S. says it values and that they refuse to subscribe to these logics. Maria shared that she only recently learned more about the history of U.S. involvement in Palestine and is making parallels to what happened in Iraq, the country she, her mother, and her grandmother became refugees from when she was a toddler. "What's happening in Palestine happened in Iraq. It is history repeating itself in a different form," she remarked in a conversation in early 2024. "America has two faces," she says. "Of course they

will provide refugees like us the best, they will show us all the humanity, provide resources, provide free education, free health, free help and make it seem like wow, America is amazing. Then you feel like your country did not provide anything. But later I realized that the reason we were in those conditions in Iraq is because of what America was doing inside the country." Maria falls silent for a bit and then adds an important realization: "They do all of this hoping that we would shut our mouths, that we should be thankful, and if it wasn't for America we wouldn't be here today. The cost would be much greater than losing our land in Iraq. But do you see how they are hypocrites? How they are the cause of all of this anyway? In all honesty, I'm not afraid to say America is a hypocrite." Here Maria is refusing to sign onto a sanitized version of the U.S., one that promotes a narrative of goodwill and social support without contextualizing why refugees exist in the first place.

Ehab also refuses the idea of a benevolent state intent on serving its people. He points out a different inconsistency, but one that also highlights the aims of the American empire. "When a terrorist attack happens," he says, "everybody has to get up there and condemn it. But nobody condemned school shootings. You know what I mean? Gun reform hasn't happened, but somehow Americans are so convinced that ISIS is an existential threat to American life, which it hasn't been. But that led us to occupying Syria. There's a clear divorce between political realities for Arabs and then reality for those who subscribe to white supremacy and capitalism and whatever serves those systems." This schism is "not surprising", he says. "I already believed that social systems didn't serve me. It's just weird seeing it be that obvious." Ehab here is highlighting that what is touted to be "dangerous" or "terrorism" is obfuscated with the material interests of white supremacist, capitalist systems. Not swiftly condemning what is deemed to be threatening, however, "makes me a target myself." Nevermind feeling "very unsafe when there

was a school shooting at [a nearby university]”. What actually matters is that his worldview of what is “dangerous” aligns to the hegemonic beliefs in the U.S. “Otherwise,” he adds. “You’ll be called crazy.”

Refusal of intimidation

The final form of refusal participants practiced is a refusal of intimidation. Many participants described that they were well aware that decidedly not aligning with dominant narratives of what is “good” vs. “bad” or “civil” vs. “uncivil” came with a consequence. There are both material and psychological threats to being misattuned with this narrative.

Maissa, for example, knows that being a very public figure on her campus advocating for Palestine has forced her to “wrestle with a true reality that this is probably going to hurt my chances of getting into law school and getting fellowships after graduation. I will probably get on the Canary Mission list.”[4] Still, she believes that there are “two truths”: “This is exactly what I want to be doing, this is so empowering and is the advocacy I want to dedicate my life to…I also know I’m limiting my opportunities by what I’m doing right now but I have accepted that.” Maissa’s refusal to back down due to likely material consequences is shared by Ehab, who was applying for PhD programs in philosophy throughout our time together. “I’ll probably land on one of those website that dox pro-Palestine people and that will actually hurt my chances…I’m honestly scared of material outcomes…but at the same time, I’m not. I’d rather be a target myself because by identifying myself as nonconformist in this sort of way, I am making it potentially easier for other people to do that same thing.”

As of May 2024, nine of the eleven participants who are students had participated in the student encampments across college campuses demanding that their universities divest from war

[4] Canary Mission is a website used by Zionists to publicly dox individuals who speak favorably about Palestinian liberation.

industries. While I did not have the opportunity to have full conversations with them about this experience, many participants and I exchanged texts and voicenotes throughout this time. “It’s invigorating,” says Ramy in a voicenote. “This is the first time I felt like something was hopeful for Palestine and I just want to keep going, even though the university called the cops on us and they swept us twice already.” One participant was arrested in May 2024 with several other peers on his campus while they were resisting the police’s attempt to sweep the encampments. “I’m fine,” Ehab wrote in a text message. “Thinking of all imprisoned Palestinians. This is nothing.” Before the encampments began, Ghaliah was reflecting on the various ways peers attempted to intimidate her for her advocacy of Palestine. “I don’t care, I’m not afraid at all,” she says. “I can’t imagine doing anything else.” Ramy shares that supporting Palestinian liberation is something he is willing to risk. “There are certain points of this where you feel like you have nothing to lose. I have more that I’m willing to die for than things that I want to live for. Sure, I like my job. I like my life. But this is something I would be willing to die for.”

When it has been difficult to derive the strength from within to refuse intimidation, participants have looked to emotional role models for guidance. Jamila describes a jarring experience of being detained by Israeli security forces for 16 hours shortly after arriving in Tel Aviv in an attempt to visit Palestine. She was sent out of the country and ended up in France. While she desperately wanted to return home to the U.S., her mom convinced her otherwise. “I was super depressed and traumatized after everything that happened but my mom called me in the morning and told me to get up, go out, and don’t let that experience weigh me down.” While Jamila was afraid and overwhelmed at the time, she now looks back on that experience and realizes “I needed to not let the detaining win, I needed to keep living.” It was difficult for her to tap into her own willfulness at the time, but with her mom’s support she was able to spend a

week in France alone and then took the brave decision to move to Amman for eight months. "I loved it," she said. "I am so glad I was pushed to not be afraid, to just keep going."

Revolutionary optimism

> *I could tell myself I have all the agency in the world but I won't know until it's time to act. — Talia*

While participants articulated that they sometimes needed to make themselves legible and other times they were poised to refuse hegemonic norms, another major finding was that participants remained hopeful and steadfast about a different future. What I am calling revolutionary optimism is not just the belief that "things will be ok" but rather the belief in a collective, unified force creating an unwritten future that looks radically different from the power structures in place today. The heart of revolutionary optimism is not just a call to dream but also a call to invest in relationships and community to create this future together. While this study did not explicitly ask participants to articulate ideas of the future, they did allude to two aspects that I argue demonstrate the presence of revolutionary optimism: *particular beliefs within the Islamic faith* and *investments in community.*

Tawakkul as the foundation for revolutionary optimism

In nearly every conversation, participants referred to aspects of Islam that helped them navigate the many constraints discussed in the prior sections (i.e. systems, norms, familial expectations). In particular, participants talked about how having tawakkul (trust) has grounded them as they keep walking into an uncertain future.

Lana, for example, is a recent college graduate who has had numerous immigration issues that forced her to go back to Morocco for the time being. As we continued talking about her process and the unfortunate updates on her visa status during our time together, she repeatedly went back to "putting my faith in God." She says "I have to reassure myself…I've learned that

the universe will take care of me, because I'm part of the universe also and that's how nature works."

The stress of immigration also prompted Maria's sense of tawakkul. She spoke about how difficult it was for her, her mom, and her grandma to settle into an apartment as refugees from Iraq. "We had nothing, it was so confusing, we didn't know the language. I had to remember that Allah was with us, that we could trust in Him." She continues to describe the material and social challenges they had along the way, and how they came to a tipping point just last year:

> I was sitting in my car and it was pouring rain very hard at the time. I just felt like crying so I poured myself out like the rain. In a sense, I felt like I could speak to Allah at that moment so I was like, 'Please, God, guide me.' And with all my passion, I was praying and crying, telling God I don't know what to do. I asked for wisdom. I said, 'I need to find your way and be connected, and I need you, I need you.' I went home and cried all night, asking for the same wisdom over and over again. And the next morning I woke up and immediately had this feeling that I was not alone, that I could keep going knowing that Allah would never abandon me.Wow — I don't know what happened. It's crazy, I just started praying all five prayers again and was even more motivated to keep going despite all these hardships. I just knew I could put my faith in the Almighty, that he will be here for me.

Mourad also speaks about being in despair, feeling like he could not endure his own hardships. When he was 13 years old, his brother died suddenly in an accident. He reflects on that time, feeling like "Entire realms of possibilities were extinguished. An entire cosmic dimension had just been swallowed up and collapsed like a dying star." He took on the role of caretaker for his grieving parents, hiding his own feelings for years and becoming "self-sufficient" until the role became more and more challenging:

> Failure — that's something I've yelled at myself. Like I have shouted at myself with that word, and it's such a painful feeling. But it's so important to recognize that we aren't here to succeed by

> never making a mistake. Like, we're here to succeed by enduring, right? And those who endure succeed by seeking Allah. There's a verse here that says, ‘Whoever relies upon Allah than he is sufficient for him, even Allah. Indeed Allah will accomplish his purpose.’ So that word rely — what's the literal point if we're good at everything? What's reliance? There would be no need to be reliant. So we recognize our limitations as a way to recognize our reliance upon Allah.

Mourad hints at the idea of tawakkul here by sharing that a reliance on Allah is an admittance that we do indeed have limitations as humans. He shares his perspective on why he seeks help from a higher power:

> We're meant to be needy. And we're needy to Allah, Allah has no shortage of things to give us, no shortage of blessings, no shortage of aid or help or assistance…And so I think so often we place ourselves in this role where we seek something from others. And the supply from people who are not endless, and we end up draining each other, we end up resenting each other, because we can't fulfill that. We end up resenting ourselves because we cannot fulfill the needs of those we love. And we end up resenting them.

What he describes is a relief from the idea that he is a failure — that he cannot give everything or expect everything. Instead, he says, “I must have patience, recognizing that it’s not all on me.”

Nisrine also reached out to God during a moment of intense despair:

> I remember I was at an all time low…I remember my parents were putting a lot of pressure on me to get a job and it was during COVID, so things were rough. I just felt like I was losing and failing…I remember it was snowing outside and I’m not even thinking of the weather, I am just so suffocated that I go outside anyway for fresh air. I felt frozen, but it wasn’t from the snow. It was this internal freeze. I went back inside and still felt frozen, then just collapsed on the floor and cried for 30 minutes. I had the worst panic attack I ever had…I felt like I exhausted every opportunity in front of me and I just prayed and prayed. I said, ‘Oh Allah, please just take over. Please guide me. I trust you.’ 20 minute later, my aunt called me about a job opportunity she heard

> about. Completely out of the blue. I applied, got the job, and moved to [the new city] all in two months. After so much stagnation, it felt like I was on a train and it just started running and I couldn't stop. There was finally steam in the train now.

We cannot imply that participants believe that their act of outreach to a divine power *caused* a change in their material lives, but we can infer that there was an immense sense of relief by relaying their anxieties to God. Nadia, for example, did not have a cathartic change in her material conditions after deciding to rely on God but does describe how it impacted her overall perspective. In our third conversation, we reflected on the many challenges of her past year. "Maybe it was never good. Allah knows best, right? I had to tell myself to trust whatever opportunities these challenges were creating." She describes how she had tawakkul to journey through these challenges:

> I lost a friend, but gained a better friend. I lost my job, but gained time. I lost my partner, but I gained self respect…At many points I definitely felt like I lost my mind, I felt crazy, I felt stagnant in my life. But I did what I could do and I know is that there are conditions in my life only Allah can change. I can apply for a job, I can try to date people, but I can't force anything. I have to rely on Allah with a softer heart. This, by the way, is what the Palestinians in Gaza are showing us too.

Many participants spoke admirably about the tawakkul of Palestinians as we continued witnessing the genocide in Gaza throughout our conversations. Talia remarks that "their faith is so strong to a point that it made me question my own. Do I have the same strength in Allah that they do?" She takes a more existential turn: "It makes me feel even more connected to my religion…there are people who lost all their family members in Gaza. What's there to live for if you lose your mom, dad, and siblings? What's there to live for honestly? The only thing they can do is to have faith in Allah to continue living life. This really has re-invigorated my own faith in

God.” Lana admits that “it’s hard for me to feel secure in this world” and compensates for this lack of security by trying to take as much control as possible. Yet she is aware that her realm of control only extends so far. “I have to reassure myself…I’ve learned that the universe will take care of me, because I’m part of the universe also and that’s how nature works.”

Ramy put tawakkul in conversation with his emotions about Palestine more generally:

> Allah doesn't tell me not to grieve. He doesn't tell me not to cry. He just doesn't. The one thing we shouldn't do is fight his fate. We believe that this is written. We believe that this is there is order and that God is just. It's hard for us to accept things, it's hard for us to let go of things. It's hard for us to settle with things that displease us, and He doesn't ask you to be happy with them. He just asked you to keep fighting injustice and to say Alhamdulillah [Praise by to God]...And that's how I look at the issue of Palestine and all the things that we're seeing today. They are an inspiration — the people and their belief. It has heightened my strength and my faith. Life gets so busy sometimes. I was already busy with my job and would go to the mosque often and you would think that thats enough but now you just want to increase your faith. Palestine has made me trust in God even more, they set the example for us.

As shared, the participants do not romanticize tawakkul — they understand that this deep faith comes with sacrifice, as modeled by the Palestinians Ramy is referring to. Yet, it is notable that watching others who are engaging in revolutionary optimism (e.g. Palestinians surviving and resisting genocide) are inspiring and deepening these participants’ sense of tawakkul.

Personal jihad

In addition to a deep trust in God, participants described working through their internal struggles with the objective of dissolving any internal beliefs that are self-limiting. The observation from the data is that many participants are engaged in the Greater Jihad against themselves, a struggle that arguably leads to the decisions discussed in the prior sections highlighting legibility and refusal. It is important to uplift this personal, greater jihad as a finding

as its own to specifically highlight the language participants produce about the process itself. I argue that the process of a personal jihad is essential to revolutionary optimism — it is the mechanism through which young Arab American Muslims are reflecting on their intentions and actions. It is life-affirming because it is a process that is committed to refining the idea of a self who has agency to make choices.

Mourad describes that the goal of the process of jihad is "integration" of the parts of ourselves that we have demonized or oppressed as a reflection of what the hegemonic culture has demonized or oppressed as well. He speaks to how integration is both an individual and collective act. "How do we expect revolutionary change within the world without enacting revolutionary change within our own selves? If you wish to deconstruct the narrative that is being portrayed by the mainstream media, you have to deconstruct that narrative that you have been upholding within your own self. This is the essence of jihad, that is the greater jihad. It is the greater struggle of how one oppresses oneself." Mourad cites Islamic rhetoric, citing that "Allah says that the ugliest thing, the most hateful act is the act of oppression. And we oppress ourselves first and foremost. So how do we liberate ourselves from this corruptive, oppressive, destructive tyrannical mentality in which we destroy ourselves bit by bit every day?"

Many participants were acutely aware of their own self-limiting mindsets. Nadia described that she "always wanted to be a perfectionist" but on her path towards trusting God more and more, she has had to learn to "slow down, allow myself some grace, and take it one day at a time." She describes that journaling every day has allowed her to "build a friendship with myself, to build patience and love for myself throughout all the good and bad things that have happened." She shares that forgiveness of her missteps is what helped her overcome her eating disorder as described earlier.

Yousef and I spent most of our second conversation talking about his transformation from someone with low self esteem to a more confident person. Some of his low self esteem was due to his own self-perception of his physical appearance, but he also talked about how feeling alienated from other Arabs and Muslims throughout his schooling added to his restlessness. “I didn’t want to play because I felt like I could be the reason we lose…if something goes wrong they always blame the fat Arab guy and I had some awareness of that.” A few years later, he decided to focus on enhancing his physical health. Committing to a new health journey for himself helped him realize he indeed is “competent”. He shared that “In the past, I would give up so easily on anything…then I began to understand that even if I had an off day at the gym, I can still be successful over the long term. Giving up is the failure, not the slow progress. Slow progress is not failure.” Yousef describes that his health journey “changed the way I perceive myself in the world. I see myself as totally capable but I also am more forgiving of myself along the way.” Yousef’s story is not just about the fruits of exercising one’s own agency but about the realization that any journey must be paired with some amount of forgiveness for one’s self.

One participant, Nisrine, was aware that a lot of her self-limiting beliefs were manifestations of her parents’ heightened anxieties. “I love them,” she says, “but they’re very cautious and I need their approval for every decision that I make.” She describes two experiences where she realized that she did not know how to make her own decisions. The first was a trip to Turkey for three months where she stayed with her grandparents. “I would go to the center of Istanbul every day. It was a 1- to 2-hour commute and I would have to make a lot of decisions along the way. What time did I want to leave? What do I want to eat today? Do I want to take a break during work?...the point I’m getting to is that these decisions and so many other points that summer slowly peeled back the layers of the onion that is me. It revealed that I was operating in

survival mode and couldn't think for myself, other people had to make decisions for me." Nisrine went on to move to a different city far from her parents shortly afterwards, where she kept "learning a lot about myself" and her desires and interests. Another eye-opening experience was prompted by her aunt:

> I remember we went to this coffee shop and I wanted to try affogato. I asked my aunt, "Do you think I should get it?" and she was like "I don't know, if you want to. You could buy it or you could not buy it. It's up to you." And I feel like it was the first time I was given the opportunity to just make a decision for myself…with my parents I can't just decide things on my own without them saying 'Why didn't you ask us? Why don't we do this? Why don't you do that?' So that was like the first time that I tried something on my own. I spent my own money and I got the affogato and I was like, okay, I'm trying something new. I actually didn't like it. It was so intense, there was too much coffee and the ice cream was just too much for me. I was just like okay, I learned the lesson. I probably won't order that again. But I was allowed to learn from my experience. Before that, I would have just felt guilty for making any mistakes. And I would've called it a 'mistake'. Now I just call things experiences and try to learn from them and take accountability for my actions.

What should be highlighted about Nisrine's experience here is her realization that in order to even reach a moment where she can extend herself grace and compassion for any action she takes, she must take the action first. In other words, sometimes a risk is necessary.

Finally, Jamila shared that she grew up in a radical household that supported armed resistance and manifestations of the outward jihad. "More recently what has radicalized me further," she begins to say. "I don't know how this is going to come out." She pauses. "But I think back to why we do the things we do in this life and understand that for me, everything I do now — politically and for the world — I do that in servitude to God. That's how I reflect.

Religion has radicalized me a lot more than anything else.” When I asked her to elaborate, she described how reconnecting to Islam changed her perspective on living:

> When I was in college, I was having a conversation with one of my friends and she was saying as Muslim people, your life is not supposed to look like everyone else's life. And that stuck with me. And it didn't have any actual tangible change or effects but it was very much on the top of my mind. Once I graduated college, I moved back home even though I didn’t want to…I had a lot of time for reflection. I just had a lot of time…So I started doing hot yoga. And, like a weird, no, it's all good. I started doing hot yoga. In hot yoga, you’re supposed to engage your brain in repetitive motions. You’re up, then you’re down. It's literally the same motions of praying. I thought about that a lot. So I started praying. If I can wake up at 5am for yoga, then I can wake up for prayers. Then I started reading a lot of Islamic texts. And then I felt a reclamation of Islam, like it was mine again. Not being put into it, you know? But choosing it. That was very, very life changing for me. It changed the way I act, the friends in my life, everything in my life…I switched from no longer living for what I want in this world, but rather to what I want in the next world and understanding my actual reason here. I asked myself: Why do I actually want what I want in this life? What is going to be the outcome of this? How do I align myself towards justice and a better world? That changed a lot for me.

Jamila alludes to the idea that the purpose of her Earthly life is to strive towards justice and to align our desires and acts towards this, which is the general idea behind a greater, personal jihad. Lana, on the other hand, uses less vocabulary about justice but articulates that she is also in a process of refining herself to be more open to general growth:

> The chief internal conflict that threatens my life is this tug between my emotions and my intellect. What I observe is that my emotions tend to go in a certain direction that doesn’t seem to be in my control. I gravitate strongly towards my emotions again and again, and that’s been the case my whole life. And I say, Well, I guess that’s who I am. There’s nothing I can do. I am not trying to control my emotions, I think it’s more about building a relationship

> with them...I read somewhere that the last of human freedoms is to choose your attitude towards circumstances that are outside of your control. Ultimately, my attitude is the one thing I have control over and that gives me reassurance that it will be fine.

Lana's conversations had much fewer references to material, political realities than conversations with other participants. However, even though she had less political commentary she was eager to talk about how her internal battles were reflective of society at large. "People can only meet you as deeply as they've met themselves. I wonder about that. I think a lot of people have a hard time being vulnerable, so we have all these shallow conversations and shallow friendships because they can't probe any further. Because they haven't done that work with themselves. Because the world is set up to make you feel more comfortable with isolation than we should be. And this all just comes up in the interpersonal space."

Ghaliah also reflected on some feelings of isolation. As she reflects on her own "avoidant behavior" where she tends isolate herself from others during more stressful moments, she recognizes that "I may have taken [this] from my mom because obviously she was doing her own thing and trying things out to survive in the way that a lot of Muslim women do in their marriages and emigration." She expressed compassion for her mom who navigated the material conditions dealt to her as best as she could. "Seeing their trajectory has afforded me a lot of compassion for her and other people." She pauses and then adds: "But I don't have to be that way. I want to work on being less avoidant, to address the conflicts in my life more confidently. This work starts within me first and foremost."

Discussion and Future Steps

"So much of the work of oppression is policing the imagination." — Saidiya Hartman

The aims of this study were the following:

1. To explore how young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities for themselves,

2. To explore the ways in which their relationship to Islam guides their creation of possibility.

What is overwhelmingly clear from this study is that young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities for themselves through attempts at legibility, refusal, and revolutionary optimism. It is worth grounding ourselves again in the idea that these moves are all approaches to *power*. These actions are not random — they are consciously (and perhaps, sometimes, unconsciously) created as pathways through, against, and circumventing structures that constrain. The three approaches are not stages and there is not a linear process to possibility-making. Instead, young people choose based on both context and comfort what they want to engage in.

Some participants engage in all three creative approaches. Mourad and Maissa, for example, provided plentiful examples of how they concealed, shape-shifted, refused, and maintained revolutionary optimism. These two participants are quite different in backgrounds. Mourad was born to Iraqi and Lebanese parents who maintained a more conservative approach to religion in their homes, which he adopted as well. Whereas Maissa is openly critical about more conservative movements in Islam and was outspoken throughout the interview process about the rigidity some Muslims have towards practice. They both, however, struck me as individuals who were open to exploring the "gray" areas of themselves in relationship to others. For Mourad, this meant a lifelong struggle of feeling like the odd one out and never quite fitting into social groups. Maissa would also articulate similar sensations about not fitting in either the Muslim nor the Arab space fully. Both spoke extensively about this in-between space and sensation. Is it possible, then, that those who engage in a variety of practices that affirm life and create

possibilities are also the same individuals who are open to exploring this in-between space? It is not easy to infer this from the data at hand but is worth pursuing.

On the other hand, all participants described the complexity of navigating multiple spaces, each with varying ideas of what is “good” or “civil”. Sami, for example, describes that the anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hatred from his time in France is much worse than anything he has experienced in the U.S. However, his main anxiety is about how he wants to raise children in public schools that are increasingly bringing in curriculum that is LGBTQ friendly. For participants like Lana, this would be a welcome opening from the constraints she has felt at home for being openly queer. For Sami, however, his distress is about the fact that this mandated curriculum feels like a *constraint,* not an option. Sami was able to fit into a crowd of Muslim friends during his undergrad because they had “similar values as me”. For Lana, relationships with other Muslims have always been fraught, particularly because she practices a version of Islam that feels genuine to her but illegible to others.

A question, then, is about legibility as a path towards possibility. There is a reward in becoming legible to other groups — both in-groups and out-groups. Legibility allows for the maintenance of social relationships. The question is not about its creative practicality but rather about the psychic cost of it. How long and with whom can someone conceal or shape-shift before they feel like it is taking more out of them than they bargained for? Jamila’s skepticism — “What civil rights? What are you actually fighting for? What do you actually want?” — reveals that there is some impatience about others’ attempts at being legible as it may lead to a dead-end, with people ultimately assimilating into the very structures that constrain them. Jamila’s frustrations are understandable. Nevertheless, other participants who attempt to be legible because it allows them to flow through contexts is also understandable. This can deepen our

understanding of how social identity theory works in practice. The groups these participants belong to are politicized (e.g. both Arabs and Muslims) *and* young people feel out of place within these groups, then perhaps the question is not about which groups young people feel most at ease with but rather the circumstances that result in distance or proximity to these groups. This, of course, can change over time or through different circumstances.

Developmental science has contributed a great amount to our understanding of ethnic-racial identity and its development. While a model still does not exist for young Arab American Muslims, existing models such as the aforementioned Mistry and colleagues' (2016) reinforce the importance of culture in meaning-making. They argue that culture is where values, ideologies, and practices are pulled from to make sense of one's own world. The way their model is described suggests that young people are pulling from the culture of a *group,* which is true of many of the participants. Emad and Nadia, for example, do describe that they take on the practices of their Arab and Muslim groups. However, the results of this study suggest that culture can become murky, mixed, or outright ignored. For example, Maissa is hesitant about some of the ideologies of the Muslim community in the U.S. and cannot help but compare them to the Muslims she knows in Tunisia, where she finds them more "open and flexible". Important to note is the fact that Maissa was born and raised in the U.S. This suggests that Maissa is actively choosing to pull from the Muslim culture of Tunisia as opposed to the Muslim culture of the U.S. What prompts Maissa to draw from this culture? How much of this decision is conscious? To what extent can we say young people are pulling from culture to make meaning about their worlds if there are multiple iterations of "culture"? This is to say what Mistry and colleagues introduced is the foundation for further understanding not culture (this is the anthropologist's work) but rather the *process* of choosing what will be employed to make meaning. Additionally,

Maissa's narrative suggests that there should be more attention paid to transnational diaspora and the ways this impacts meaning-making, too. Shams' (2020) work mentioned earlier provides a foundation for this with the Muslim diaspora but is more of a testament for the ways they perceive the world, as opposed to the actions diasporic youth take on. Again, her work is a foundation to further theorize diasporic youth and the way they create possibilities for themselves.

Looking further into how young people are consciously or unconsciously choosing where to pull from is perhaps an indication of young peoples' creative attempts at breaking free from confinement — and perhaps they choose to pull from culture in one context because it *does* make them feel more free; in another context, they may choose not to pull from culture at all because it would have the opposite effect. Foluke Taylor (2023) a psychotherapist and writer, reflects on what humans do when they feel confined by systems: "But again, alongside the meager existence to which you have been confined there is also — always — the living *otherwise* where 'at the same time, this forced intimacy with the inhuman was repurposed for survival and formed into a praxis for re-making other selves that were built in the harshest conditions'", quoting Kathryn Yusoff, a professor of geography. Refusal, then, is a step away from mere survival — it is a "living *otherwise*" but not one that is simply attempting to thwart a threat. Instead, refusal re-codes the threat, rejects the power the threat purports to have. This was seen in participants' refusal of racialized norms of what is "civil" as well as patriarchal expectations. Participants also demonstrated that the heightened police state in the U.S. is not one that they care to spend time or energy fearing. They shared that they could center their ways of knowing and being, refusing to believe that resistance to violent state-sanctioned power, for example, was seen as "terrorism". What is hopeful about this is that young Arab American Muslim youth are indeed practicing

these types of refusal — this flies in the face of much of the literature from the 2000s and 2010s that rightfully suggested that this population was fearful and engaging in actions such as concealing or shape-shifting (see Amer & Awad, 2016). More recent texts have uplifted the political lives of young Arab American Muslim youth, such as ethnographies about Arab and Muslim youth movements in the U.S. (Salih et al., 2017). However, these have emerged largely from anthropology and sociology. What is still needed is an understanding of *how* individuals arrive at refusal in the first place. What are the socializations we should pay attention to? Did their parents impart this spirit on them? Was there a moment that radicalized them? To what extent do their peers influence courageous acts of refusal? Tracking how young people came to refuse — and perhaps understanding what felt far-fetched about refusal in the first place — is a fruitful direction for future research.

While the review of literature for this study did not explicitly address socialization, the questions posed above urge a return to studying this in the context of Arab American Muslim youth. At this point of the study, however, what can be examined that is related to socialization is the framework of narratives as illustrated by Syed and McLean (2021). They write that dominant, alternative, and personal narratives are created through the processes of negotiations and internalizations. The results of this study demonstrate that Arab American Muslim youth are engaging in negotiations. The fruit of these negotiations are these acts — making themselves legible, refusing dominant norms and narratives, and engaging in revolutionary optimism. It is abundantly clear that so much of what this population does is *negotiate.*

What is pressing and interesting is the possibility that young Arab American Muslims are also internalizing narratives (e.g. white supremacy, capitalistic meritocracy, cis-heteropatriarchy). Many of them, like Nadia and Ramy, spoke profusely about their qualms with

cis-heteropatriarchy in particular, indicating that they have a *reaction* and *resistance* to those who have internalized this narrative. However, I contend — as a psychotherapist and a researcher — that a true interrogation of what a person has internalized requires years of conversations and work. I would argue that this would be an extremely beneficial use of time as it would help scholars better understand the vivid, inner worlds of young people. Moreover, if some are engaging in the Greater Jihad against themselves, struggling to purify their soul by confronting what they do to harm themselves and others, a more intimate series of conversations can help elucidate what this process of jihad looks like.

Another important question: What is beyond refusal? To live a life diametrically opposed to systems can be life-affirming — in fact, it is necessary if your life is being threatened — but there must be something that massages the creative parts of ourselves, the part of being human that is interested in birthing new lives and worlds. "Revolutionary optimism," Dr. Lara Sheehi recently shared at a conference, "is a *wajib* [duty]. It is our duty to remain optimist and commit to the belief and surety that Palestine will be liberated. Our daily commitment is a psychic alignment. We must name every single process that allows revolutionary moments…This prevents us from commodifying despair and defeat" (Sheehi, 2024). Her words mirror the sentiments participants described as they spoke about tawakkul and personal jihad. Both of these acts, I would argue, are acts of "psychic alignment". Participants decisively looked at a challenge in their lives and committed to clarity on finding a path forward, all while leaning on a higher power. An initial draft of this study's findings had named this section as "Creative paths forward", which is not inaccurate but does not fully grasp the way faith plays a role in participants' lives. Still, some participants spoke about what they are creating: Maissa is attempting to create an Arab Student Association on her campus that welcomes the LGBTQ

community unapologetically while also forging programming that will help build her community's consciousness about a decisive issue. Mourad is a filmmaker who experiments with the various "textures of being in-between, of not having certainty about anything or anyone but knowing that the path is supposed to be about love and justice". Hanan is struggling with friendships that feel overbearing or misaligned with her values. She is beginning to forge new friendships, which feels "vulnerable" especially during a time of great unrest on her campus. We can argue that she, too, is creating. Yet acts of creation were not explicitly probed in this study. In future work, participants can be asking about what new spaces and endeavors they are creating for themselves and how revolutionary optimism may be a part of these attempts.

Concluding Thoughts

This study revealed that young Arab American Muslim youth create possibilities through themselves by employing a variety of acts that are depending on context and their own comfort. Possibility-making is not a linear, defined process but rather a space in which people can play. Play requires some amount of courage — to try something that may not work, that may sever relationships, that may leave one with a feeling of defeat or disappointment. This is precisely why an orientation like revolutionary optimism — an optimism that includes values of Islam that participants find grounding — can be promising for playing for possibility. Perhaps these acts are not unique to the Arab American Muslim population and can be explored with other groups as well, particularly those who have had histories of colonialism as well. In whatever case, the creation of possibility is a sign of life — specifically a sign that people who do not see themselves as without agency. Even a decision to conceal or shape-shift is a signpost that one *wants to live* and is trying to do so under any circumstances. These acts are to be studied as portals into how humans express their will to live. For Arab American Muslim youth, this is a

break from a couple of decades of literature that has expressed anxiety about their well-being, for understandable reasons. What is exciting and novel here is not the absence of struggle, of course, but the way young people transform it and make it something that is in service to an evolving self in pursuit of love and justice.

Appendix A — Participants

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Current residence**	**Background**
Ahmed	21	Midwest	Syrian, born in Syria and moved at age 8, middle class. Lives away from family on campus.
Ehab	22	Midwest	Syrian, born in U.S., middle class. Lives away from family on campus.
Ghaliah	24	West Coast	Yemeni, born in U.S., middle class. Lives away from family.
Hanan	23	East Coast	Egyptian, born in U.S., middle class. Lives away from family on campus.
Jamila	24	West Coast	Palestinian, born in U.S., middle class. Lives with family.
Lana	22	Between East Coast and Morocco	Moroccan, born in Morocco, middle class. Lives with family.
Maissa	21	Southeast	Tunisian, born in U.S., middle class. Lives away from family on campus.
Maria	21	West Coast	Iraqi, born in Iraq, middle class. Lives with family.
Mourad	24	Midwest	Iraqi, Lebanese, born in U.S., middle class. Lives with family.
Nadia	20	South	Sudani, born in U.S., middle class. Lives with family.
Nisrine	23	West Coast	Egyptian, born in Egypt, middle class. Lives away from family.
Ramy	24	West Coast	Palestinian-Jordanian, born in U.S., middle class. Lives away from family.
Sami	23	West Coast	Egyptian, born in Egypt, middle class

Talia	22	East Coast	Palestinian, Irish, born U.S., middle class
Yousef	20	Midwest	Syrian, born in U.S., middle class

Appendix B — Methods

Two years ago to the day, this dissertation proposal was defended with an understanding that I would be utilizing qualitative methods, specifically multiple semi-structured interviews with each participant. I had understood that writing and referring to a protocol during an interview also requires flexibility, reflexivity, and shifts during the conversation itself to better allow for participants' voices to be heard. Two weeks after my proposal defense, I began training under the supervision of a clinical, psychoanalytic psychologist at a private practice in Downtown Los Angeles. This psychologist graciously took me under his wing when I expressed interest in becoming a licensed psychologist myself and has taught me much about the art and science of psychotherapy.

What I learned in the clinical space impacted my approach to interviewing immensely. In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the purpose is to make the unconscious conscious. The therapist employs a variety of techniques to facilitate this — deep listening but also observation of body language, physical ailments, vocabulary, omissions, slips of the tongue, patterns of scheduling (or not), transference (how the patient feels towards the patient) and countertransference (how the therapist feels towards the patient). Learning how to be in relationship with someone for an hour every week in this particular way opened up my eyes to the ways in which a researcher could be in relationship with a participant that could deepen the conversation. Perhaps a researcher cannot always make the unconscious conscious, but perhaps they can point out some observations that will illuminate affect. I provide an example from one exchange below. Here, Ahmed is speaking about a previous romantic relationship:

> Ahmed: I never reacted poorly, I've always been supportive, but at that point what that person did was very wrong. I don't know if it's jealousy, heartbreak, or confusion…it's upsetting but I also feel like I shouldn't be feeling this way.

> Asil: If you could pinpoint a feeling besides “upsetting”, what is it? What’s the feeling?
>
> Ahmed: I think it’s regret? On her behalf? But that feels like I am controlling her. I don’t like language, it’s always too limited. I just don’t know. It doesn’t make sense.
>
> Asil: It doesn’t have to make sense. You just can explore it, just play with it, see whatever comes up —
>
> Ahmed: — I feel like whenever I say something, I’m contradicting myself. The feelings I have are weird. I have this imagery in my mind of what college is supposed to be like, of what romantic partners are supposed to be like…I’m realizing I have this sort of savior complex, and I can share a bit more about the girl I was dating…

There are specific moves I did not realize I was employing until I reviewed the transcript. In this case, it was asking Ahmed to dive into a feeling more, encouraging him to “explore” or “play”, and affirming that he “doesn’t have to make sense”. To be frank, it was almost an automatic response to his words. I attribute this interview move to my clinical training, which emphasizes curiosity, precision of language, and observation of contradictions. After this exchange, Ahmed began to speak about his struggles with patriarchy and how he inevitably propagates narratives about “what it means to be a man”. This exchange became crucial for opening up this conversation with Ahmed, which in turn informed the code “refusal of performance”.

In short, I am curious and excited to continue to explore this potential in qualitative research. What could it look like to move from semi-structured interviews to semi-structured conversations that work towards a research aim but allows for detours, curiosities, unpackaging of contradictions? I contend that it is entirely possible to extend the methodological frameworks we have learned in our graduate school training in this way. A couple of considerations:

1. Move from one interview to multiple interviews: In many ways, the richness of this data came simply from the fact that I spoke to all participants (except one) three times over the course of about 9 months. Having multiple touch points allowed for us to traverse the past, present, and future together as researcher and participant and provided more material to work with and converse about.
2. Rename “interviews” to “conversations” while maintaining a systematic approach: Both the participants and the researcher may be more willing to engage in non-linear, open, curious discussions if this linguistic shift happens. A “conversation” naturally prompts a different image for most people than the word “interview”. However, regardless of the vocabulary used, researchers are still guided by their study aims, questions, and theories. A shift in technique can continue to ground the conversation in these aims, questions, and theories but simultaneously allow for participants to expand, detour, and elaborate. The researcher’s job is return to this grounding while allowing more space for the participants’ voices.
3. Take principles from psychoanalytic training to inform interviewer training / methodological training for qualitative researchers: Qualitative researchers can benefit from specific conversational moves that I gained from my training as a psychoanalytic therapist that would be beneficial to a researcher. Some of these include what I discussed above, specifically observations during the conversation itself. Other techniques include reflecting on our own affect. “How do I experience this patient?” is a question I often ask myself as I consider someone in my office. Actions like their defensiveness, overwhelming attempts to charm, specific questions, and overall approach to the hour are not gone unnoticed. This is the essence of person-centered interviewing and requires

practice, practice, practice. It is not practical for qualitative researchers to undergo psychoanalytic training, but more exposure and practice in the principles of person-centered interviewing can be resourceful to deepening conversations.

Table 1

Parent code count by participants

Act	Total participants	Percentage of participants	Translation
Legibility	**13**	**86.6%**	**Most**
Concealing	12	80%	Most
Shape-shifting	9	60%	Many
Refusal	**13**	**86.6%**	**Most**
Refusal of performance	12	80%	Most
Refusal of epistemic disciplining	8	53.3%	Many
Refusal of intimidation	6	40%	Some
Revolutionary optimism	**10**	**66.6%**	**Many**
Tawakkul	6	40%	Some
Personal jihad	5	33.3%	Some

References

Abdel-Salam, L., Rifkin, R., Smith, L., & Zaki, S. (2019). Experiences of gender among Arab American women: A qualitative study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *66*(3), 255–268. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000329

Abdulhadi, R., Alsultany, E., & Naber, N. (2011). *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*. Syracuse University Press.

Abdul-Jabbar, W. Kh. (2015). Internalized Arab diasporic identity: Revisiting the Duboisian double-consciousness. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, *8*(1), 54–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2014.976401

Abou El Fadl, K, & Linnhoff, J. (2022). *The Prophet's Pulpit: Commentaries on the State of Islam*. Usuli Press.

Abu El-Haj, T. R. (2015). *Unsettled Belonging: Educating Palestinian American Youth after 9/11*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226289632.001.0001

Ajrouch, K., Hakim-Larson, J., Fakih, R. Youth Development: An Ecological Approach to Identity. In Amer, M. M., & Awad, G. H. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of Arab American Psychology*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Ajrouch, K. J. (2004). Gender, Race, and Symbolic Boundaries: Contested Spaces of Identity among Arab American Adolescents. *Sociological Perspectives*, *47*(4), 371–391. https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2004.47.4.371

Ajrouch, K. J., & Jamal, A. (2007). Assimilating to a White Identity: The Case of Arab Americans. *International Migration Review*, *41*(4), 860–879. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00103.x

Al-Muhaisen, Ayat. “Arabs on TikTok: Identity Performance & Reclamation in the Digital Sphere.” AZEEMA, AZEEMA, 24 Mar. 2021, https://www.azeemamag.com/stories/tiktok-communities.

Ali, A. I. (2014). A threat enfleshed: Muslim college students situate their identities amidst portrayals of Muslim violence and terror. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *27*(10), 1243–1261. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.820860

Amer, M. M., & Awad, G. H. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of Arab American Psychology*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Amer, M. M., & Hovey, J. D. (2007). Socio-demographic differences in acculturation and mental health for a sample of 2nd generation/early immigrant Arab Americans. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, *9*(4), 335-347.

Awad, G. H., & Amayreh, W. M. (n.d.). *Ch 5 Heightened Prejudice Post 9/11 and Psychological Outcomes*. 14.

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso books.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological bulletin*, *117*(3), 497.

Bazian, H. (2013, October 31). *The souls of Muslim folk*. Opinions | Al Jazeera. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/10/31/the-souls-of-muslim-folk

Beydoun, K. A. (2014). **29 BETWEEN MUSLIM AND WHITE: THE LEGAL CONSTRUCTION OF ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITY*. 35.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White supremacy and racism in the post-civil rights era*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Britto, P. R., & Amer, M. M. (2007). An Exploration of Cultural Identity Patterns and the Family Context among Arab Muslim Young Adults in America. *Applied Developmental Science*, *11*(3), 137–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701454633

Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical inquiry*, *18*(1), 1-21.

Cainkar, L. A. (2009). *Homeland insecurity: the Arab American and Muslim American experience after 9/11*. Russell Sage Foundation

Childs, E. C., Lyons, A., & Jones, S. L. (2021). Migrating mixedness: Exploring mixed identity development in New York City. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(4), 782–801. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1654153

Cisneros, J., & Gutierrez, J. (2018). "What Does It Mean to Be Undocuqueer?" Exploring (il) Legibility within the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Immigration Status. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *5*(1), 84-102.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *u. Chi. Legal f.*, 139.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (n.d.). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 388.

Dedoose Version ***9.0.17***, cloud application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data ***(2021)***. Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC www.dedoose.com.

Dubois, W. E. B. (1903). Of our spiritual strivings.

Eisenberger, N. I. (2012). The pain of social disconnection: examining the shared neural underpinnings of physical and social pain. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, *13*(6), 421-434.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis.* Norton & Co.

Fine, M., & Sirin, S. R. (2007). Theorizing Hyphenated Selves: Researching Youth Development in and across Contentious Political Contexts: Theorizing Hyphenated Selves. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *1*(1), 16–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00032.x

Gerber, J., & Wheeler, L. (2009). On being rejected: A meta-analysis of experimental research on rejection. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *4*(5), 468-488.

Ghaffar-Kucher, A. (2012). The Religification of Pakistani-American Youth. *American Educational Research Journal*, *49*(1), 30–52. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211414858

Ghavami, N., Katsiaficas, D., & Rogers, L. O. (2016). Toward an Intersectional Approach in Developmental Science. In *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (Vol. 50, pp. 31–73). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2015.12.001

Goforth, A. N., Pham, A. V., Chun, H., Castro-Olivo, S. M., & Yosai, E. R. (2016). Association of acculturative stress, Islamic practices, and internalizing symptoms among Arab American adolescents. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *31*(2), 198.

Goforth, A. N., Oka, E. R., Leong, F. T., & Denis, D. J. (2014). Acculturation, acculturative stress, religiosity and psychological adjustment among Muslim Arab American adolescents. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, *8*(2).

Gualtieri, S. M. A. (2009). *Between Arab and White: Race and ethnicity in the early Syrian American diaspora*. University of California Press.

Hamad, R. (2017, April 21). *The uncomfortable truth about Australian 'diversity'*. The Sydney Morning Herald. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/the-uncomfortable-truth-about-australian-diversity-if-youre-not-a-stereotype-you-dont-count-20170420-gvok72.html

Hamzeh, M., Carmona, J. F., Sánchez, Ma. E. H., Bernal, D. D., & Bejarano, C. (2020). Haki/pláticas ~ testimonios/shahadat: Arabyya feminista decolonial praxis. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *17*(3), 250–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2020.1786750

Harris, A. (2016). Belonging and the uses of difference: Young people in Australian urban multiculture. *Social Identities*, *22*(4), 359–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1113128

Hooks, Bell. (1994). Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom . London: Routledge

Katsiaficas, D., Futch, V. A., Fine, M., & Sirin, S. R. (2011). Everyday Hyphens: Exploring Youth Identities with Methodological and Analytic Pluralism. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *8*(2), 120–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2011.572743

Kumar, R., Warnke, J. H., & Karabenick, S. A. (2014). Arab-American male identity negotiations: Caught in the crossroads of ethnicity, religion, nationality and current contexts. *Social Identities*, *20*(1), 22–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.864464

Maira, S. (2004). Imperial feelings. *Globalization, culture and education in the new millennium*, 203-234.

Mandviwala, T. (2015). *Navigating the "Known:" The Socio-Cultural Development of American Muslim Adolescent Girls*. *7*, 15.

Meari, L. M. (2011). *Sumud: A philosophy of confronting interrogation*. University of California, Davis.

Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). On decoloniality. In *on Decoloniality*. Duke University Press.

McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2015). Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context. *Human Development*, *58*(6), 318–349. https://doi.org/10.1159/000445817

Mistry, J., Li, J., Yoshikawa, H., Tseng, V., Tirrell, J., Kiang, L., Mistry, R., & Wang, Y. (2016). An Integrated Conceptual Framework for the Development of Asian American Children and Youth. *Child Development*, *87*(4), 1014–1032. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12577

Naber, N. S. (2014). Imperial Whiteness and the Diasporas of Empire. *American Quarterly*, *66*(4), 1107–1115. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0068

Naber, N. C. (2012). *Arab America: Gender, cultural politics, and activism*. New York University Press.

Naber, N. (2005). Muslim first, Arab second: A strategic politics of race and gender.

Naber, N. (2000). Ambiguous insiders: An investigation of Arab American invisibility. *Ethnic and racial studies*, *23*(1), 37-61.

Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2014). *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge.

Orfalea, G. (2006). *The Arab Americans: A history.* Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press.

Ozyurt, S. (2013). Negotiating Multiple Identities, Constructing Western-Muslim Selves in the Netherlands and the United States: Negotiating Multiple Identities, Constructing Western-Muslim Selves in the Netherlands and the United States. *Political Psychology*, *34*(2), 239–263. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00924.x

Park, K. (2014). A Rhizomatic Diaspora: Transnational Passage And The Sense Of Place Among Koreans In Latin America. *URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY*, *43*, 37.

Polat, M. (2017). Tasawwuf-oriented Educational Philosophy and its Relevance to the Formation of Religion and Ethics Course Curriculum. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *5*(5), 806–814. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2017.050514

Prins, J., Polletta, F., van Stekelenburg, J., & Klandermans, B. (2015). Exploring Variation in the Moroccan-Dutch Collective Narrative: An Intersectional Approach: Narrative & Intersectionality. *Political Psychology*, *36*(2), 165–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12169

Qutami, L. (2020). Censusless: Arab/Muslim Interpolation into Whiteness and the War on Terror. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *23*(2), 161–200. https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0017

Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster* (Vol. 1). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rogers, L. O. (2018). Who Am I, Who Are We? Erikson and a Transactional Approach to Identity Research. *Identity*, *18*(4), 284–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2018.1523728

Rogers, L. O., Kiang, L., White, L., Calzada, E. J., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Byrd, C., Williams, C. D., Marks, A., & Whitesell, N. (2020). PERSISTENT CONCERNS: QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON ETHNIC-RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT. *Research in Human Development*, *17*(2–3), 130–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2020.1831881

Rogers, L. O., & Syed, M. (n.d.). *To be published by Cambridge University Press 2020*. 35.

Rothman, A. (2021). *Developing a Model of Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy: Islamic Theology and Contemporary Understandings of Psychology* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003104377

Rothman, A., & Coyle, A. (2020). Conceptualizing an Islamic psychotherapy: A grounded theory study. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *7*(3), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000219

Ryan, L. (2014). 'Islam does not change': Young people narrating negotiations of religion and identity. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *17*(4), 446–460. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.834315

Said, E. (1978). Introduction to Orientalism.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed). SAGE.

Salih, R., Welchman, L., & Zambelli, E. (2017). The Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM): Transnational politics, inter/national frameworks and intersectional alliances. *School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Working Paper*, *27*.

Shaheen, J. G. (2003). Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, 171–193. doi: 10.1177/0002716203588001011

Shams, T. (2020). *Here, there, and elsewhere: The making of immigrant identities in a globalized world*. Stanford University Press.

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2. ed). Zed Books.

Syed, M., & McLean, K. C. (2021). Master narrative methodology: A primer for conducting structural-psychological research. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000470

Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1986) The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In: Worchel, S. and Austin, W.G., Eds., Psychology of Intergroup Relation, Hall Publishers, Chicago, 7-24.

Taylor, F. (2023). *Unruly therapeutic: Black feminist writings and practices in living room*. WW Norton & Company.

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Quintana, S. M., Lee, R. M., Cross, W. E., Rivas-Drake, D., Schwartz, S. J., Syed, M., Yip, T., Seaton, E., & Ethnic and Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group. (2014). Ethnic and Racial Identity During Adolescence and Into Young Adulthood: An Integrated Conceptualization. *Child Development*, *85*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12196

Wang, S. C., Raja, A. H., & Azhar, S. (2020). "A lot of us have a very difficult time reconciling what being Muslim is": A phenomenological study on the meaning of being Muslim American. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *26*(3), 338–346. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000297

Ware III, R. T. (2014). *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic education, embodied knowledge, and history in West Africa*. UNC Press Books.

Younis, T., & Hassan, G. (2019). Second-generation Western Muslims: A qualitative analysis of multiple social identities. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *56*(6), 1155–1169. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461518804554

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *40*(3), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331