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Racial Formation and In-Betweenness of MENA and Mixed-Race Categories: A Critical Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

The U.S. was constructed on a Black–white racial hierarchical system to maintain the subjugation of communities of color, of which we understand through racial formation that race continues to adapt and evolve to support structures of anti-Black racism. Our project centers racial formation as our theoretical framing for why race categories exist under a white supremacist, anti-Black system that profits from hierarchical inhuman realities. This critical collaborative autoethnography explores the learning journeys of one biracial Korean faculty member and one Lebanese-American undergraduate in their continued inquiry about erasure/affirmation of mixed-race and MENA identities. We explored the in-between gray spaces that our mindbodyspirits move through, and revealed the systematic impact of violent structures on our racialized mind–body–spirits. Findings allude to the limits of our belonging, in relation to dominant structures that cannot hold our in-between experiences. We urge social justice professions to recenter the literal marginal voices of mixed-race and MENA peoples as essential in the relational racial healing and restorative journeys of our multiracial and intersecting communities of color.

Keywords: racial formation; biracial identity; MENA identity; critical collaborative autoethnography; Census; Arab-American identity; Asian American identity; mixed race

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1. Racializing (Our)Selves: Introduction and Racial Formation (As Theoretical Frame)

We live in a globalized society, which is most certainly not post-racial, that continues to organize a social order in which institutions/systems rely on and re-produce power structures around social identity categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and more. This story begins with an instructor–student classroom experience that has culminated that allows us to explore the connections and divergences around our racialized identities. In this section, we introduce our biracial Korean faculty member and Lebanese-American student entry points of our communities to the United States (U.S.), and current contexts of our identity experiences.

> I (Monique) started off freshman year taking *Social Work Issues of Diversity and Oppression* with Dr. Stohry and was attentive to her experiences she shared with the class about being mixed race. After we discussed in class how we are classified based on categories given by institutions in place, Dr. Stohry was intrigued by my OWN identity and where I was fitting in. I reached out to ask some questions about being Middle Eastern in America, which was when Dr. Stohry had an idea to begin a research project about the Middle Eastern and/or North African

(MENA)[1] category in the United States Census. I presented that work and have been working with Dr. Stohry since!

I (Hannah) was introduced to racial formation as a theoretical framework during my doctoral years in an educational leadership program, which was such a foundational lens for understanding how my biracial body is positioned and manipulated (Stohry 2022). In returning to social work (from educational leadership) as an academic discipline and practice, teaching primarily diversity courses, I utilize critical lenses (centering race) in classroom application around "diversity." I utilize my body as curriculum (Baszile 2006) in praxis to demonstrate that social phenomena are real (Boylorn and Orbe 2014), and must be interrogated as an acknowledgement of the power divide between faculty/student and practitioner/client.[2]

Racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015) was introduced in Hannah's classroom, where Monique was a student, to demonstrate how social identities are constructed, in addition to the impact of difference and hierarchy as constructed and reproduced. Questions came up during the class about favored races. *How did that happen? How does it feel to be white (favored race)?* Monique pondered the impact of her racialized identities when the 2030 Census came out and there was a MENA category, which was then separate from the white race category. *Is it going to be a favored or an othered category?* It was through our shared journey of exploring where our respective identities fit in the social order that we realized a common point of connection, how our racialized statuses were formed (without our consent), and that we both live in the in-between spaces in the racial hierarchy. At first glance, it might seem that a mixed-race Korean faculty member and a Lebanese-American student might not have anything in common, but it is more intricate than the surface-level identities that we use. Although our experiences being racialized are vastly different due to how we appear, our common ground stands the same—we are both misunderstood and do not fit the dominant narrative.

At the time of writing this paper, the context of racialization (especially the biracial Asian and MENA category) and race's explicit intersections with religion, immigration status, citizenship status, free v. enslaved status, and class, are ever-present in the U.S. context. This research project explores the shared learnings of a biracial Asian professor and a Lebanese-American student around racial formation, identity erasure, in-between status in the gray areas, and affirmation that our "ambiguous" or "problematic" race statuses invite symbolic violence on our collective mindbodyspirits. We utilize critical autoethnography as a methodology to explore our inter-connected yet vastly different racial identity statuses, for the purposes of shared community-building and liberation.

We first situate this research project by introducing our sociohistorical contexts for our racial category identities of being Middle Easterners who have been traveling to the U.S. since the 1800s. But in the 1909 case of George Dow (*Dow v. United States*), a Syrian immigrant living in South Carolina began the conversation about whether Middle Easterners were seen as white or not. Dow was then refused naturalization because he did not meet the racial requirement of the United States standards, which was only applicable to "aliens being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent" (Gualtieri 2001). But due to uproar from the Syrian community nationwide, George Dow's last attempt for naturalization was approved, and Syrians were then able to be classified as white. It was celebrated in the beginning, as it granted citizenship and opportunities like voting. Middle Easterners, specifically from the Levantine region, were able to pass as white due to their lighter complexion, but that did not apply to some judges who were not convinced that anyone from Asia was White (Aziz 2020).

In re Najour 174 F. 735 (N.D. Ga. 1909) (Aziz 2020), which exemplifies the role that complexion has on a person's eligibility for citizenship (Haney López 2006), the judge in re Najour was not convinced,

> by the government's emphasis on the applicant's darker, walnut complexion as a basis for determining race. So long as the defendant is Caucasian, the court reasoned, he qualified as 'free white persons' within the definition of the naturalization laws. (Aziz 2020, p. 6)

A person's race, ethnicity, and skin color are directly inter-connected with pains and privileges of existing within the U.S., which continue to this day, particularly in how we categorize race. For example, "The updated SPD 15 adds a new, dedicated 'Middle Eastern or North African' (MENA) category. In the previous 1997 SPD 15, MENA respondents were defined and tabulated within the White racial category." (Marks et al. 2024). Therefore, future research is needed to examine the impact on health, education, and more (Abboud 2023).

The first anti-immigrant policy in the U.S. was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Takaki 1993; National Archives 2023). Asian American, as a separate racialized group, did not become a recognized encompassing group until cohesive student organizing in the 1960s, in alliance with the Black Power Movement (Hewang 2023). There are challenges with diaspora and exclusion/inclusion when Asia is such a large continent. The Asian/Asian-American experience then becomes essentialized, even assigning the Model Minority Myth, in which Asian Americans are positioned as the model for racialized minorities who are held to a high standard of success (Sue et al. 2021).

It was not until 2000 that (primarily white) mothers of biracial Black children advocated for the Office of Management and Budget to include the option to select more than one race on the Census so that people could be recognized as biracial (Castagno 2012; Census.gov 2024, March 28). It is important to note that previous race categories of "mulatto" and "quadroon" were apparent in previous Censuses, and that blood quantum (Indigenous) practices (Tallbear 2003) indicated people's social outcomes and social belonging, which shifted when the categories demonstrated fluidity, conditionality, and flexibility over time.

As of 2025, and the evolution of this research project, the race categories of the Census are as follows: white, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawai'ian or Other Pacific Islander (Census.gov 2024, March 28). It is important to note that Korean is a sub-category of the Asian race category, and Lebanese is a sub-category of the white race category. In the U.S., race is the most obvious organizing social factor, referring to "a socially constructed political system and product of racism that categorizes people into different groups based on perceived physical differences and/or recent ancestry in order to create and maintain a power hierarchy that privileges whiteness" (Atkin et al. 2022, p. 22). Ethnicity refers more to "a social group with shared culture, language, and/or place of origin" (Atkin et al. 2022, p. 22). Race and ethnicity are often conflated in daily life, though, and ethnicity is considered a main organizing social category elsewhere in the rest of the world (Mersha and Beck 2020).

The U.S.'s formation of race is context-specific, in that anti-Black race formation is the foundation of our current sociopolitical infrastructure (Omi and Winant 2015; Haney López 2006), reliant on Indigenous genocide, violent westward expansion, stolen land/lives, and the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, spanning across the American continents (Wilder 2013). Omi and Winant (2015) introduce an important framework, racial formation. Racial formation is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 109), meaning that we "make up people" (p. 105). Omi and Winant (2015) further elaborate as follows:

> But while the act of categorizing people and assigning different attributes to such categories may be universal, the categories themselves are subject to enormous variation over historical time and space. The definitions, meanings, and overall coherence of prevailing social categories are always subject to multiple interpretations. No social category rises to the level of being understood as a fixed, objective, social fact. (p. 105)

These social categories cannot simultaneously exist without the creation of dominant groups and subordinate/marginalized vulnerable groups; we also maintain that any group in power can become vulnerable (race power dynamics are portable) (Omi and Winant 2015), depending on the ruling power that determines the rules of the social game (Young 1990, 2012). Associated with groups of power are rights, privileges, and access, and racialized groups exist in hierarchies, with the white race being at the top (Gayles and Tobin 2006; Omi and Winant 2015; Haney López 2006). Race is not just a label or social category; while being socially constructed, we understand that race has a psychological (Fanon 1952) and even genetic component (e.g., epigenetics) (Menakem 2017). Race and other organizing social categories were created with the intent to control and assert superiority. The impact of faulty categories has often been ambiguity and the presence/existence of the unknown. Omi and Winant (2015) remind us, though, that while race has a devastating social impact, it has also been the catalyst for community, resistance, and liberation movements.

2. Get(ting) the Job Done: Methods, Methodology, and Analysis

In this research project, we utilize critical collaborative autoethnography (Christiansen and Tian 2025) as a methodology, in which the self is centered as the site for sociocultural analysis and positioned as the subjectively valid points of data (Boylorn and Orbe 2014). Critical autoethnography is described as a way "to understand the lived experiences of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination" (Boylorn and Orbe 2014, p. 20). Critical autoethnography as a methodology allows researchers with non-dominant identities to explore the inter-connections and divergences of our racial identities with reflexivity and assert that our subjective positionings and experiences are valid and empirical (Tilley-Lubbs 2016).

Collaborative autoethnography positions researchers as sharing power and responsibilities in a mutual and co-constructed research process (Chang et al. 2013). We situate ourselves as experts on our lived experiences (Tilley-Lubbs 2016; Boylorn and Orbe 2014). Christiansen and Tian (2025) expand critical autoethnography with collaborative autoethnography as critical collaborative autoethnography to emphasize the utility of centering and sharing researcher subjectivity, which is particularly important when exploring racial identities that are not normative.

Our early research meetings were fraught with many questions: *Why are we here? Does this matter? What are some connections and divergences?* Hannah initially mused the following:

> I'm thinking about both Monique and I as "Other" in the race dialogues, and perhaps Edward Said's notions of Orientalism (and the devaluing of "Oriental" or Eastern knowledges, onto-epistemologies, therefore us). I'm also thinking of the in-between-ness of our identities. (research meeting notes)

We decided to begin with writing responses to the prompt of "What does 'gray area' mean to me?", in order to explore what we might have in common, being positioned in-between white and Black binaries. This prompted multiple discussions and a running log of their research meetings. Each researcher provided feedback on the other's responses, which then encouraged us to respond to the prompt "Describe the event that demonstrates our interaction with the gray area. Describe what makes it a gray area. Why does it stick out

to us?" Our process was fraught with "it's just what we go through" and "it's fucking depressing" despite wanting other outcomes.

We honed our gray-space narratives as key data points that we could analyze through spending our research meetings pondering meaning. We each read each other's work, provided comments, asked questions for clarification, and went through multiple rounds of coding for meaning, looking for information that would lead us to organize our findings into themes. Each round of coding narrowed down to several themes, which cued us to go back through the data (from our initial responses to gray spaces to our narratives, in which we used the major themes as the focused point of analysis). Our iterative process reflects what Christiansen and Tian (2025) ascribe to being a "critical friend," in establishment of trust, logistical maneuvering, constructive feedback (particularly on our positionalities), and ongoing throughout all stages of this research process. The next two sections comprise our narratives.

Over and Over Again (Monique)

> As my junior year of high school was coming to an end, students in my grade were given the task to start our college application process with a website that would help us apply to colleges. On the website, we had to answer questions about ourselves: our age, current school we attended and other information including race. I subconsciously clicked "Asian" since Lebanon was in Asia, and it seemed to be the most appropriate box to gravitate to. After I clicked on it though, a drop-down of east Asian races popped up. I then clicked down the rest of the boxes and saw Lebanese under the "White" category. I clicked on it and thought nothing of it. Then, it was time to fill out my FAFSA form, and it was the same exact situation. I still didn't think too much of it—it was more of a relief that I had gotten it done and over with.
>
> I remember having this conversation with a friend of mine during a meeting we were having where we could check our race on the website we used to check our grades on. My friend had said how her brother had Asian under his race category, but she had Caucasian (which too was odd… since they had the same parents). I then checked mine and saw it was ALSO Caucasian as my listed race, which then brought up the question of "Who is picking our race?" Well, the world kept spinning and the sun still rose, I still thought nothing of it but it seemed to now linger in the back of my mind a little more prominently.
>
> Now, it is senior year and we are getting accepted into colleges and applying for scholarships. This institution did "On-the-spot Admissions" for students who were interested in going to their school. I had applied and was talking with the admissions faculty on possible scholarships I would be offered. She had told me about a merit scholarship which provided $11,000 a year with the website criteria of "underrepresented…community as determined by the scholarship committee," I had every other qualification also stated. The admissions faculty member told me that she would get back to me on my qualification, and stated that she was not sure of the answer but it was definitely a possibility to get this scholarship. I had explained to her too how I identified as Lebanese, but had no box to click—I was purposefully put into a situation where I had to pick the "White" category. After a couple emails back and forth, I was told I did not qualify for the scholarship. It was a moment of defeat, honestly. I didn't understand what I was fighting for at the time… but I just knew this didn't feel good. Not that being oppressed is anything desirable, but I felt as if I had to explain my disparities to show an institution that I need assistance. That I am underrepresented. It

was a confusing situation and left me toggling with my emotions for a bit, but as always, the world kept turning and the sun still rose.

The Fluke Isn't a Fluke: Fluke! Fluke! Fluke! (Hannah)

I had just moved to New England from the Midwest, where I had spent the majority of my adult life. I had been engaged in racial reconciliation learning projects (James et al. 2020) at the university and community-level in the Midwest and I was interested in exploring racial reconciliation work in New England. In working on a small grant project with one of our Programs Coordinators during the Summer, I searched online for a local person who might be a useful ally/trainer for future programming, someone that is actively involved in radical community-based healing. I located someone and invited the woman and a campus-based Programs Coordinator to a virtual meeting.

Scheduled as a short 30-min meeting, shortly after we introduced ourselves, this person invited us to engage in a practice from their workplace. She explains that the practice is to determine a window of tolerance for being able to chat about racial justice work, explaining that we can assess our ability to tolerate hard work. This explanation was followed by our preferred gender pronouns AND our racial identities. I got excited because it is not a norm that we discuss our windows of tolerance OR our racial identities.

They each introduced themselves as white women. I then introduced myself, going on the briefest spiel about being multiracial, and that I am read as white (in the Midwest) and that my research is on multiracial experiences. The woman then says to me something along the lines of "in our work here, we affirm multiracial experiences and we know the conditionality of your identities and how you move in and out of spaces" or something to that effect. I blacked out after that, so I can't even write the exact language. I just remember the explicit affirmation and grasp of the complexities of my identity. Outside of my mixed race clinician group, I can count on one hand when my ambiguity and racialized complexities have been affirmed and NOT objectified or questioned or multiracially micro-aggressed. (Johnston and Nadal 2010)

I blacked out, in the sense that my mindbodyspirit couldn't comprehend that a white woman was so deeply entrenched in hard healing work could affirm MY identities. That THIS is a possible lived experience that COULD BE. It was such a whiplash moment that reveals that in many ways my existence is not acknowledged, and that I am read as white (in the Midwest) and that my research is on multiracial experiences. I don't often notice the gray that is my norm, much like the dull, gray winters in the Midwest.

This brief encounter wasn't a fluke. This happened again, perhaps 7 months later in another meeting with this same woman. We discuss the window of tolerance, do our introductions, and name our racial identities. I introduce myself and use the language that I'm read as white, but that I do not identify as white, and that I do not use the language of "passing" or "white-presenting" because I do not intentionally do those things, and I do not align with that language. She effortlessly affirms me. Again. that I (and other multiracial people) can identify as we want, and that the BIPOC spaces are inclusive.

I know it's the gray areas because of those moments that cause me such a psychic disorienting yet distantly familiar pause. It was a familiar "Oh, she's consistent in that practice of belonging and anti-oppressive practice." What a relief, from a

> white woman. The practice of consistency of affirmation toward me felt so very obvious to me in that it was effortless without othering. The affirmation. Being seen. In my fullness/wholeness. Being seen in my gray areas. MY world. ME. It's SO SCARCE that I feel it viscerally when it is verbally affirmed (Stohry 2022), or even micro-affirmed/micro-validated (Solórzano et al. 2020). To some degree this middle/gray space is disorienting, but it's MY world. To have people step into my space. It feels very personal. It's about me. To be seen. To be acknowledged. To be affirmed. Effortlessly. When I don't have to do anything to exist, this feels like the safer corners of the gray areas.

3. "What the Holy-Ante": Findings

How in the world could these two racialized as "Other" identities relate to each other? What similarities could being mixed have with being Arab-American? Our similarities built a sense of community, a sense of *inter-connection* experiencing similar hardships, and just the fact that we could discuss without having the need to explain them (Stohry 2022). Our gray spaces reveal that in the midst of darkness from the oppressor(s) and oppressive systems, there will always be a light that will shine brighter. We went with our gut for how to organize our findings into the following sections, which represent the inherent interconnection of *mindbodyspirit*: "Keep Me in Mind," which focuses on the mind; "It's Giving Body" focuses on the physiological and physical; and "Caught a Vibe", which focuses on our spirit.

"Keep Me in Mind"

In this section, we elaborate and relate the effects of racial projection on the mind, beginning the explanation of the effects of this on the mind–body–spirit. We acknowledge the connection between our experiences and the lasting effects of understanding what it means to be forgotten and solitary.

Every aspect of our data (not just our narratives, but our collective meeting notes and our ongoing comments are documented throughout every stage of this project) reflects the extent to which we think about our racialized experiences that we are in our heads. We are seeing in our data *how much we are thinking about things*; when we think of "mind," it is not just our internally isolated experiences, but seeing *how we are seen* in our daily lives. *When* we are seen. Acknowledged. Affirmed.

The lingering effect of our consciousnesses haunts and never quite leaves us. Monique reflects in a research meeting "I still thought nothing of it but it seemed to now linger in the back of my mind a little more prominently." Monique reflects again: "I feel like once something of this sort happens to you, it never really leaves you. I don't think it's common that something like this only happens once, but if it is, it is a core memory. These instances remind me of branding (tattooing with hot rods)." Are we *out of our minds*?

There are several moments of clarity (about our experiences). Something had to happen for us to know (or be aware) that "I'm different because of xyz." Our lived experiences reflect that when something is blatantly disorienting to us, the mindbodyspirit goes haywire. For Monique, she had to teach a professional about how she identifies as Lebanese, but had no box to click except the white race box in college applications. It was her first time aware of institutional violence at that level. A lot depended on that distinction and dismissal, such as future jobs, money, and overall future. She then later explained this situation to a staff member who worked in that department, and yet again, she was gaslit into thinking that this was not the case as to why she did not receive the scholarship, despite being wrongfully disqualified for said scholarship.

Monique further reflects that "it was a moment of defeat, honestly," during our data analysis meetings: "It is most often mentally draining, getting denied the scholarship

meant I was not oppressed, that my lived experience was one of a White person, the lack of resources and money my parents had because they were immigrants was not enough to give me extra needed assistance because (at that time) I didn't fit their criteria." This meant that Monique's lived experience did not match an institution's projection of her racial identities and pushed her to the margins of the Black-white race distinctions by institutions. Those aha moments, or moments that take you aback, are realization moments where you realize you are in an ongoing circle, or you are in this constant cycle, and certain things that happen remind you that you are in the cycle, and that we are experiencing it here and now.

In Hannah's case, it is the shift from the biracial panic (usually a microaggression that causes disorientation, despite its normality) (Johnston and Nadal 2010) to a moment of disorientation because of affirmation (Stohry 2022). Those moments are visceral because they reflect how our bodies and assumed/projected identities impact others' perceptions of us. For both of us, the larger (and perhaps global) Black–White filter creates a mismatch of our experiences with our projected (by others) identities. It is as painful as being forced to fit a square peg into a round hole, where we are told to see/experience the world in a way that physically hurts us and causes us psychological discomfort, despite our constant assertions that we do not fit a narrowly projected racialized experience. The norm has always been exclusionary, as we said earlier in this project.

The gray space we commonly talk about means being invisible. However, on the contrary, we are far from that. But, to feel invisible and not seen is so much more powerful than physically not being somewhere; to be physically seen but not being included is violent. To be seen and known to others means you are acknowledged, but you are then purposefully not included or considered in the bigger picture of what it means to be human. In direct relation to the mind, we see how our emotions and feelings are felt throughout our bodies and how mind and body, specifically, are connected. While we read our narratives, it is clear that the mind is the powerhouse of emotions. In Monique's narrative, she says how being denied the scholarship was instinctual, and she "…just knew this didn't feel good." These situations and instances we are forced to be in are nothing short of emotional and draining—being forgotten is more than just not being included. It is a physical emotion, too. On the contrary, Hannah's story is hopeful and is an experience not only of being acknowledged, but also of feeling it. Emotions (physical and mental) are difficult to put into words. Sure, there are words such as "sad," "mad," and "happy," but to describe the feeling you have when you picture these emotions is what makes the process more troubling. Although the author's stories differ from each other when it comes to the surface emotion the audience reads, the deep-down feeling, that body feeling, is the same. *In order to realize* how *we are included, we needed to see that* we were not.

Having the ability to understand our experiences is significant, yet we (the authors) are in differing stages of awareness (it is not linear), as evidenced by multiple reoccurrences of "I didn't/don't understand" and "I didn't know" throughout all stages of this project. There is a link between consciousness and the need to understand and need to be understood. *Or, is that the voice of the colonizer* (Anzaldúa 2012, 2015; Said 1978; Fanon 1952)? In Hannah's narrative, we notice that she is explaining herself to a stranger *and also* the reader. Being denied existence or ability to exist without needing to explain her lived experiences has socialized her into needing to be understood. If she just explains at the outset, perhaps she will not receive resistance to her existence. It is also driven by her need for others to understand something that we are told is unexplainable. Her explanation to the reader also demonstrates to the reader/listener that she has researched this, that the reader/listener does not know much about this topic, and she is intentionally positioning

herself in her own way. *However*, this is still a heavy burden of "if only they just understood through these lenses, then they'd understand me and question me less."

Hannah's narrative demonstrates the lengths she has gone to understand her positioning and how people read her racial identities and, therefore, treat her, so she anticipates this and over-explains. It is a mind game, pivoting all the time (Stohry 2022). The fact that she uses GRE words (in her narrative and in the two virtual meetings mentioned in the narrative) shows she has dedicated her life to understanding her positionality. But, as Monique says (supported by countless other studies), "this is mentally draining."

Monique, on the other hand, experiences not-enoughness and awareness of difference (as projected by other people), because she deserves a place to fit in. One where you *just know*. You *just know*. #iykyk[3]. You know. We know where we fit/exist, and where we do not. Is it our responsibility or duty to educate others (tokenism much?) on what this "you *just know*" feeling is? If we speak up, we will be invalidated. If we stay quiet, we are questioned as to why we did not say anything sooner. The cons are that if you say something, you receive retaliation and backlash and then if you do not say something, the response is "why didn't you say anything" (colonial/capitalist double bind).

Psychic dehumanization, geographic distance, curricular erasure, and the propaganda machine desensitize us to the killing mechanisms. For example, throughout the time that Hannah and Monique have been collaborating, global attention has turned to the Middle East in differing stages, to say the least. Both authors reflect on the idea of "If they can bomb people JUST LIKE YOU then they DO NOT CARE ABOUT YOU." As long as it is not in my backyard (the NIMBY effect), then the individuals (as a collective) do not need to care if it does not directly affect them. It is serious because we are literally killing our own people. Why is this important? American people can turn a blind eye (now known as color-evasiveness) and participate in intentional ignorance, which is supported by state-sanctioned and tax-funded violence. Willful ignorance (of genocide, for example) is a(n) (un)conscious thing, one that happens in the brain. The mind is a funny thing. Who has the right to exist? Do we exist in people's imaginations in the future?

Our brains/minds are a muscle, and we refer to "muscle memory," the memory, the things that happen in our minds, and our recall, and how we *know*. We are gaslighted into thinking our memories are not important or our experiences are seen to be important, "and THAT is how they control us" (Hannah's words). We *know* the conditionality of our existences. Do you?

"It's Giving Body"

Our bodies *feel* and express emotions that come from the mind (and spirit). What our racialized/ethnic knowledge (Korean and Lebanese) has told us from the beginning is that our mind–body–spirits are inter-connected, and while our physical bodies do not always have language, we carry ancestral experiences and knowledge.

We also gather cues from our bodies about our current contexts. Living in the U.S. is traumatic, in that if you are not a part of the privileged majority (those who have white body supremacy) (Menakem 2017), y/our bodies are suffering. Race/ethnicity is projected onto our bodies (Omi and Winant 2015; Johnston and Nadal 2010); therefore, our bodies experience how the rest of the world views/values us. How our bodies move through spaces is consistently informing our consciousnesses, safety, and dis/connection.

What is the relationship of our bodies to space and place? Hannah is biracial, where both sets of ancestors derive from different continents, and constantly feels displaced with no place to go (Stohry 2019). Monique's family is from, and partially lives in, Lebanon. Neither of our ethnic communities is a majority community in the U.S. Being forced to occupy majority spaces means that we are constantly pulled in different directions, or into a middle space. Our project's early stages began with us defining and analyzing what gray

spaces are and what they mean to us. It is worth noting that our bodies' relationships with the gray spaces were salient.

Hannah's body is often at dis-ease in the middle space (coloring outside the Black–White lines), which "means the space where things go to die and never be seen. Gray means to be invisible." However, this fluctuates, and her body goes into shock (freeze response) when she is acknowledged. She is simultaneously at ease (body) because she understands it (mind) and is at peace (spirit). It is worth noting the impact of emotions on the body shifts, as the conditions are ever-changing (Stohry 2022; Bow 2010). What about if/when the gray spaces are both affirming yet delegitimizing?

Monique is in an earlier stage of her career and consciousness journey, being younger, but is keenly aware of bodily dis-ease when she reflects, "but I just knew this didn't feel good." That is the sensing that is often disregarded by the white gaze (Du Bois 2008). The physical feeling of something that, forgotten, is more than just not being included; it is a physical emotion, too. It is a "knowing" within.

Our bodies know (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) when we experience harm, violation, and violence, in conjunction with acceptance, home, and belonging. Harm and violence result when our bodies are non-consensually placed into gray spaces (not quite fitting race categories, etc.), which has an impact on our bodies. Scholars and theorists support exploring the impact of displacement on bodies (Bhabha 1994). But affinity spaces and affirmations are affirming. In many instances, we have to create affirming spaces and create mobility for us to be able to say "it feels more like I'm retreating back to my safe places." This is often because it is what we know, because we have had to learn to adapt to those spaces.

We describe the body as being lost, evidenced by Monique describing her experience with "the feeling of not fitting in." Hannah's experiences of being "uncomfortable" and in an "impossible position" signal that something's not quite right. These choices of words exemplify how we can *physically* notice a difference, like cringing due to the discomfort of not being included in the bigger picture or in important/everyday institutions. There is a gray space between not quite knowing where to go or be, and simultaneously, *also* feeling stuck because there is no place that you think you belong in. The "impossible position" mirrors Monique's experience of being in limbo between not being applicable to your own identity on paper and yet being treated by society and living through that identity every single day. We have realized the major distinctions between how people perceive our bodies vs. how we perceive ourselves vs. how we identify (and how/what we tell other people) vs. how the government identifies us (again, conditionality).

Perhaps our bodies are lost (who determines this?), but perhaps our bodies are just non-existent, yet simultaneously dehumanized. The body does not exist on paper (coloniality dictates our existence). For Monique, in the Arab American experience, one *must* exist as both "white" *and* an ethnic group. For Hannah, she was 13 years old when the U.S. Census finally allowed her to exist as *more than one* race (accomplished in 2000). Neither of our experiences is front and center, and yet they remain perpetually central to conversations of race (White–Black binary) (Haney López 2006). *What qualifies you to be a person of color?* If it is not documented, it never happened, right? If documents do not prove it, then what does?

The majorities *and* fellow "minorities" only see what they want to see. They "see color" when they want to see it (again, the precarity of the mind projects onto the body, and is a never-ending feedback loop). What (when) they see is a physical existence (or lack of), which contradicts what they do not (want to) see (Bow 2007; Kim 2023; Haney López 2006). These constructions have a real impact on how we (do not) exist. Oftentimes, we are "forgotten on paper" and forgotten by the institution(s). Monique mentions this multiple times throughout, and Hannah would fully acknowledge the limitations of institutions.

Monique quips, "but I just knew this didn't feel good." Our bodies indicate that we physically feel something. Being forgotten is more than just not being included; it is a physical emotion, too. It is a knowing within one's mindbodyspirit.

You cannot separate past, present, and future (Bow 2010).

It's giving body. It is giving. Body. Tea.

"Caught a Vibe"

In this section, we affirm that our spirituality is instinctual, deeper than surface-level emotion. We allowed our spirits to guide how we expressed our discoveries about spirit. Monique uses stream of consciousness to illustrate what we mean:

> Dimmed the light in my spirit, Inside our bodies—a lightbulb is on. Everytime an instance of exclusion happens… it dims and flickers but never goes out. But, in moments where you feel included and seen, that lightbulb will never shine brighter. The spirit connects the mind and body together… the holy trinity. If one of them goes out and gives up, they all do. That's why safe spaces are so important. The lightbulb in our spirit may have gone out, or maybe our bodies have given up from exhaustion, but these safe spaces keep other parts of us alive and going—they make us feel safe.
>
> The gray space is one where *I* (*Hannah*) *just know in my soul* that I've been placed here, and that I also know on a deep level that I belong, particularly in ways that I will never belong in Black-white spaces. I also know on a deep level that I belong here, and I belong when I'm here.

Hannah's spirit knows peace because she understands. She knows truths. Her spirit rests way more now. She knows what she needs to know, and that is good enough. She is good enough. She is enough.

This instance, specifically in Monique's case, seemed much deeper than just experiencing exclusion and lostness. It was a deeper wound that was unveiled; the blood had finally seeped through the bandages and showed from the outside. It was not about the money, it was not about receiving a scholarship, it was about little Monique. It was Monique in 4th grade being told by her classmates that the portrait she made of herself did not look like her because she had to mix the peach and brown together to make her skin tone. It was the freshman year of high school when Monique was being humiliated in class as she was pointed at and was told she had a bomb in her backpack. It was Monique who had yet to realize what the world had in store for her, but was so oblivious to how gloomy it was going to be. In relation to this "lightbulb" Monique describes, it was becoming dimmed so early in her life that it felt so normal. In reading Hannah's story, you see this lightbulb become brighter and remain hopeful that the spirit is always there and will have those moments of sparkle and brightness. But this is only because she has been performing spirit work to receive the burden of projection and pivoting less and less.

For Hannah, it felt like a warm hug bathed in relief that felt (un)familiar. Perhaps her autopilot assumption that she needed to perform and meet yet another professional who would not see her was gently met with an "I'll meet YOU where you're at." What her spirit needed and *longs for*. *Stunned*. Stun*ning*. The burden became lighter and brighter. The connection was familiar, but it was seldom. Something about the exchange felt different from other platitudes. What was most noticeable was the *absence* of the *absence*. Meaning that there was something there that was not usually there. Most notably, the biracial and mixed-race experience *and* the Asian experience is usually erased. Because there was a presence of genuine connection (*knowing* it was most assuredly not performative, as evidenced by

the acknowledgement happening in each subsequent meeting) and praxis, Hannah could feel spaces and voids being filled in ways she *always knew* she needed.

4. "What If We're Not the Problem?": Conclusions

We are left wondering if anyone else is feeling this, too? Do you feel us? See us? How common is this? Do other people feel the same way? The specifics of what this research paves the way for are, hopefully, more awareness of the processes of racialization, particularly around biracial and MENA populations, the genesis of our pains, the genealogy of our ancestors, and the power dynamics of racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015). There is hope that this (type of) research will bring a sense of belonging and community (Christiansen and Tian 2025) to so many people out there who also endure and experience this type of invisibility: the victims of the gray space. With this, being seen is amplified when larger onto-epistemologies are represented through decision-making processes that reduce harm for *invisibilized* communities, until racist ideologies and structures cease to exist. It might not become better in an institutionalized way, but it does emotionally, and in your spirit, and you end up finding/creating spaces where you feel included.

I (Monique) believe that this research has brought me closer to my heritage and granted me the opportunity to realize the importance of my background and culture. While navigating through this project, I had the opportunity to visit Lebanon and really indulge myself in my home away from home. It truly is remarkable to feel and know that you are seen and be unapologetically you. This experience of feeling inclusivity and belonging filled an emptiness that was hollowed out the more I stayed in America. Returning back to Lebanon was eye-opening to see, and it showed me what community meant, including what it felt like to be in a community that is so scarcely envisioned because of the racialization many of us experience. An incorrect racialization (Omi and Winant 2015), at that. It has also taught me that this work is important, even when you think no one is listening, as race is formed with(out) you or *for* you (Omi and Winant 2015). Although a change might not happen overnight or even within a year, I can still envision that one person will be affected and feel a sense of security when realizing that other people are in this "grey area."

Toggling came up, in how we *understand* ourselves and others, and as we (in)formed and un(in)formed ourselves around our racialized selves (Omi and Winant 2015). When we talk about MENA and biracial groups, we see a common theme of feeling uncomfortable in situations where we know we do not feel welcome or included. This feeling is very different for our counterparts, who tend to feel discomfort when being held accountable for creating these uncomfortable and unwelcoming spaces for us. Future research should explore the mechanics of toggling as a function of racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015), the gray spaces, and the knowledge that results from these discomforts, not for the purposes of needing to explain everything, but for, perhaps, our own communities to have a better understanding of our own selves and our own liberated onto-epistemological journeys. We keep going, persisting, and "the world kept turning and the sun still rose" (Monique). Being able to toggle together was important in that it allowed for "connection, shared experiences, being able to see someone in their fullness, and knowing that the other person can hold that kind of space" (research meeting notes). Here, we summarize the *why* of our work:

> Putting a rock in the river and everything flows around it…that's what our work does…we're always there, and the life cycle will continue after we share this research. But, we're always going to be there. We're hopeful that by at least sharing our information about what's going on in our lives and how we feel, we might help other people, and inform others that this is happening.

If you know, you know.

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Notes

[1] We refer to Middle Eastern/North African identities as MENA throughout. We also interchange MENA with Arab-American throughout, much like utilizing terms like "mixed race" and "biracial" interchangeably.

[2] These two mini-introductions serve to share our positionality and our orientation to this scholarly relationship, and serve to reflect that our lived experiences matter in orienting the reader to our lived experiences, which we explore later, using critical collaborative autoethnography methodology.

[3] "If you know, you know" is a colloquial and popular culture reference that indicates there is an element of needing to be in on the joke, or "in the know" in order to understand. Many things cannot be easily translated.

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