

1-1-2015

## Half Empty/Half Full: Absence, Ethnicity, and the Question of Identity in the United States

Ashley Josephine Martinez  
*University of South Florida, [ajmarti2@mail.usf.edu](mailto:ajmarti2@mail.usf.edu)*

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Half Empty/Half Full:

Absence, Ethnicity, and the Question of Identity in the United States

by

Ashley J. Martinez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Mahuya Pal, Ph.D.  
Carolyn Ellis, Ph.D.  
Ambar Basu, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
March 20, 2015

Keywords: transnational, multiracial, multiethnic, race, hybridity, fatherlessness

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, I'd like to acknowledge my advisor and mentor, Dr. Mahuya Pal. I have so much admiration for you and am so happy you accepted me as your advisee. I could not imagine this experience without you. You've made a profound impact on me and I'll carry what I've learned from you thorough out my academic career and life itself. I would also like my committee members, Dr. Carolyn Ellis and Dr. Ambar Basu. You each have inspired me in countless ways, I treasure your advice, guidance and all I've learned from you. You all represent the backbone of the support system I've had at the University of South Florida!

I am grateful to be surrounded by the caring hearts of my family and friends. Special thanks to my mother Lesley, Abuelo Cesar, Abuela Alice and brother Justin for supporting me in each and everything I do, this project that hits so close to home. It is your relentless love and support that gives me wings and allows me to charge fast toward my dreams. Thanks to my lovely friends Ozzie Irizarry, Aubree Pelaez, Michelle Russell, Vicky Casal-Data, Mariana Stavig for tolerating my craziness and providing a listening ear throughout this project and reminding me that work and fun can, and do, coincide!

I'd also like to thank other members of my Department of Communication family at USF, specifically, Grace Peters, Lisa Spinazola, Ariane Anderson, Josh Youakim and Anne Copeland. Your smiling faces, wit, musings, and insight made this experience I'd also like to acknowledge some other professors who have had a profound impact on my studies up until this point and who's courses helped to shape and inspire this study: Dr. Aisha Durham, Dr. Serap Erincin, Dr. Chris McRae, Dr. Jessie Turner, Dr. Navita James and Dr. Melanie Graham.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study helps us understand the complexities of transnational abandonment, and transnational abandonment in the context of Saudi heritage in particular. Based on a textual analysis of narratives on a blog by individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers, my findings suggest that they discursively construct their identity in three ways: a) by negotiating their illegitimate status as perceived by many Saudis, and the validity of their search; b) by making sense of the absence of father and the cultural knowledge of the paternal side, while negotiating the inevitable presence of the father in many other ways and their ethnic difference; c) by navigating the tensions of continuing with the search and anticipating the consequences. These themes highlight how conditions of father absence, particularly where the father has a national origin different from one's own has dynamic and conflicting implications socially and culturally, and for production of identities for their children. In sum, this study challenges uncritical celebration of multiculturalism in the US, and broadens the understanding of the complexities of hybrid identities.

## PREFACE

My *being* is founded on my understanding of my racial identity formation in my childhood. It has launched me on what I call a journey to find an “ethnic core.” My experiences of negotiating a multiethnic identity heavily inform the shaping of this study.

### **Being**

I was born in Tampa, Florida, to a Cuban-American mother from Tampa and a father native to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. During my parents’ divorce, my father stopped attending the court hearings, returning to his home country without sustaining contact or communication. I was two to three years old at that time, so young that I have no living memory of my father. In a way, my father’s absence was a positive. For instance, rather than being raised by only two parents, I developed a close and impenetrable relationship with three parent figures, my mother, my abuela<sup>1</sup> and my abuelo<sup>2</sup>. These are the relationships for which I have the utmost love and regard.

Despite a supportive and loving network of parent figures, I cannot say that this removed curiosity about my father or paternal heritage. Regardless of my lack of memory and my father’s absence, I was aware of my Arab heritage for as long as I can remember. My mother never hid this aspect from me and other family friends, who would often ask my mother, “What is she? She looks exotic.” This made me feel strange and foreign. Very early I learned being Arab was beautiful, but simultaneously, ugly and shameful. Protective and caring, after 9/11, my family

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish for Grandmother

<sup>2</sup> Spanish for Grandfather

told me not to let other children know that I was part Arab or had a father from Saudi Arabia. Only ten years old at the time, I did not understand the good intentions behind hiding a heritage. I felt like I was bad blood. Furthermore, overhearing the clucking of conservative politics from friends, hearing distant relatives make nonchalant proclamations of their hopes to annihilate the entire Middle East, and being addressed with the racial epithets “sand nigger” and “towelhead” by an acquaintances was enough for me to remain silent, and dissociate myself from any identification with a part of my ethnicity. I felt it would be unsafe to do so both privately and publicly.

9/11 was a day that amplified my fear of Arab persons and crafted my view of Arab women as hopeless. It was also the day that I began to only acknowledge my Latina identity, which paradoxically reinforced my imagined identification as Arab. In other words, actively concealing my Arab identity increased my awareness of this racial identity. Obviously, this day shook our ground, it was a day the country grieved in unison beside those who personally grieved the loss of their loved ones. It shook the world for me, as an American.

I was so young on the day of 9/11 I didn't know how to feel. I felt I should cry, but I didn't fully comprehend the horror of the event. I knew it was horrific, but I could not cry like the adults around me, because I couldn't understand its magnitude. However, that day I wanted to be a good patriotic citizen, I wanted to spread peace in a time of terror. The following Saturday I walked around my block with my radio-flyer cart and some printed American Flags that said “God Bless America,” and left them wedged in the door frame or rolled them and fitted them into the handle of my neighbors' door handles. A part of me did this, because I wanted to encourage unity in a time of chaos. Oddly enough, another part of me felt responsible, even though it had nothing to do with my own actions. As far I as I knew, I had a blood bond to a

family native to the country of several of the hijackers. The bad taste in my mouth of having an absent father in congruence with the events of 9/11 exacerbated my negative perception of Arabs and Muslims as a whole.

In my adulthood, I search to embrace parts of myself I've tucked away, sometimes in search of an "ethnic core", by establishing relationships with Saudi women and Muslims. I often strive to learn the Saudi culture--to feel better about myself and as a means of gaining a sense of resolve, confronting fears, gaining understanding, and even pride. However, all of this may have never happened had I not faced the dilemma during my adulthood: To communicate or not to communicate with my father.

### **Searching**

When I was a child, the images of Arab women on television, as prisoners dressed in black or beige, caused me to think they wore their funny clothes to conceal the bruises their abusive husband must have inflicted on them. This imagery was still on my mind when I spoke to my father.

In 2011, I heard my father's voice for the first time over the phone. The Arabic accent was foreign to me, I thought it was supposed to be nasty and guttural like the men shouting 'Allahu Akbar' (the call for evil to rise over the Earth) in war, terror and hijack movies. However, his voice was nice, his accent almost sounding Spanish, an accent familiar and unthreatening to me. In an emotional avalanche, I began my journey to negotiate the mistrust I had for the father I never knew and address the constant fear of being kidnapped from my bed onto a covert aircraft to be sold in exchange for a dowry to an old Sheik. I started looking for Saudi women in my hometown of Tampa in search of truth, and in a way, to heal what I felt was an inherent evil I was so ashamed of in my blood.



I remember the first time I was invited for dinner at Dalal and Ghaliah's home, two Saudi women I was introduced to through a mutual friend. They brought out their abayas\* in the evening. They talked of the garment with tenderness, cherishing it as a symbol of tradition, womanhood and security, but said that that it didn't have the same soul outside their country. Dalal was a self-proclaimed tom-boy, she always wanted to be a boy and cut her hair very short in her youth. They allowed me to touch the garment, the breathable, movable material.

Dalal was engaged at eighteen. However she broke off the engagement choosing never to marry. She explained that she was strong willed, set on working in a male dominated industry, despite the incessant head-butting with "traditional" men who thought that women's place was meant to be the home. I once asked her how she felt about driving. With the driving ban, she was not allowed to drive at home, but she was driving in the U.S. She told me she did not worry much because she had a driver. However, once when she was seventeen she had told her driver to bring the car. She snuck into her brother's bedroom, put on his thobe and keffiyah and took the spool of her mascara to draw a mustache on her upper lip. She surprised the driver and told him to take the passenger seat, driving—undercover—for the first time ever, in traffic, in the streets of Riyadh. I once asked Dalal if she wished to immigrate to the U.S or return to her country. She responded with conviction. She wanted to continue to work and live in her society that she loved, despite her resistances with whom she men she worked. She loved and respected her people, her country, her family and her self. I yearned for the sense of freedom she exuded. She taught me that brave women take risks instead of asking for permission.

They taught me my first Arabic words: Alhamdulliah, 'Thanks to God'; Inshallah, 'God willing'; and Walla, 'I swear'.

My dearest Saudi friend Amani was married and always wore her abaya and hijab.

However, she exchanged the traditional black for colorful choices, so she could “be approachable,” she said. Once, she took her shayla (scarf) and tied it niqab style (over her nose and mouth) and sighed. She confessed that she wore her niqab in Makkah,<sup>3</sup> because she would be glowered at without it, the way she would be glared at with it in the U.S. I think she missed the security. It was humorous that when we Skyped after her return home, I routinely heard her firmly demand her husband to gain control of their toddler, “*Abdullah. Abdullllllllah!!! Abdullaaaaahhhhh!!!*” She talked more than anyone I ever met and I say that in the most affectionate way. She taught me, that life was not always sugar, but salt. She also taught me the Arabic words: Mashallah, ‘May God Protect You’; Subhanallah, ‘Glorious God’; and that Allahu Akbar, really meant ‘God is great’.

It is amazing to me, how the images of abaya<sup>4</sup>/burka<sup>5</sup>/hijab<sup>6</sup>-wearing woman in the U.S. media, are submissive, hopeless and without agency. The women I know have voices, hopes, agency- Why do we Americans think of Saudi women as oppressed (Husian 2002)? Is it because we are too ensconced in our own habitual conditions that we consider any situation outside of our own norms repressive? Is liberation measured only by the way in which we adorn ourselves? Is voice understood only by our ways of expressing ourselves? Is agency comprehended by only our ideas of free will?

I never had such admiration for women in my life, but they were just that, *women*. Not *the* Saudi woman in the sense of some “authentic” home grown beans from the Middle East. Even as I make an attempt to recount my memories in this very moment, I cannot speak or authenticate them. Nor can I speak or try to authenticate myself.

---

<sup>3</sup> The holy city of Saudi Arabia

<sup>4</sup> Long cloak or robe that conceals the form of the body

<sup>5</sup> A full head to toe covering that conceals the body face and eyes

<sup>6</sup> Headscarf or head covering. Hijab is not simply a noun, but also describes the action of being modest.

## **Becoming**

*Yet I have longed for authenticity. It is like the horizon itself, not tangible, but illusory. It is the point the sky and earth appear to meet.*

I am asked, What are you?

That question haunts me, like the hyphen.

*I'm double-hyphenated American:*

*Latin-hyphen-Arab-hyphen-American*

*Not by choice, my body is put into question.*

*A Stranger asks, Where are you from?*

*'Because —singing— 'Merica ain't ever enough.'*<sup>7</sup>

\*\*\*

*and... I too, sing America \*.*

\*\*\*\*

*I am asked, "Well, how does it feel?"*

*...to be what?*

*To be Arab?*

*To be Latina?*

*To be American?*

\*\*\*

*It feels half empty;*

*It feels half full.*

---

<sup>7</sup> This is a reference to the Langston Hughes poem, "I, too, am America"

\*\*\*\*

*The horizon is always further than expected. I could chart the globe before finding it:*

My Abuela<sup>8</sup> says to me, “I love making cafe con leche, it is part of me.”

In my family, my generation is left clutching tightly to remnants of Spanish culture. When one must assimilate and give up identity, and an entire language for a chance at the American dream, the one last cultural thing to go is food.

The depth and breadth of my Latina feels skin deep—and recipe rich—:

*Ropa Vieja*

*Revoltillo*

*Cafe Con leche*

*Arroz Amarillo*

\*\*\*\*

*The depth of my Arab feels skin deep—*

*A reminder of grief, abandonment*

*—Of a time when I passed as only Latina*

*Afraid to let others know.*

*—I now save Arabic words like souvenirs*

*—in hand,*

---

<sup>8</sup> Abuela means grandmother in Spanish

*a clenched fist of sand*

*And perhaps that is it.*

*I am not on this journey to find myself, I am not lost. I am not here to authenticate myself; I am creating a self-embracing, a lost, and imagined part of my identity. Central here is the discovery, not the destination—the discovery in the possibility of a self found in the process. I'm experiencing an ever-changing self, in a masquerade with others—:*

\*\*\*\*\*

I too, sing, America.

I am not Saudi. Saudi is in me, but I can't go there.<sup>9</sup>

I am not Cuban. Cuba is in me, but I can't return.

I am not Spanish. España is in me, but there is no home there.

I am American, married to a complicated relational hyphen.

Some parts history, some parts love. That made me.

Born at los intersticios<sup>10</sup>

Not in fragments, but as a whole.

\*\*\*\*

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<sup>9</sup> This poem is an adaptation of a poem by Aurora Levins Morales titled "Child of the Americas"

<sup>10</sup> This is a reference to an article by Evelyn Al Sultany titled "Our Moving Selves"

I am woman. *Let me show you.*

I am Latina. *Let me show you.*

I am Arab. *Let me show you.*

I am American. *Let me show you.*

I am all of these things and simultaneously a convergence; I am all of these things, and none. My body is never authenticated but always on display, frequently in question:

With sand in one hand, and beans in another—I am clutching tightly to what I can, tight roping across a hyphenated identity I do not know how to balance.

*I am longing for more. I am walking around the hyphen—and towards the horizon, longing for more:*

A stranger asks, “What are you?”

Would you like latitude and longitude coordinates? The name of countries?

Would you like sugar? Would you like spice? Everything nice?

A Sofrito?

Garlic

green peppers

onions?

Saffron, Cardamom and Frankincense?

A whole entire fucking Whole Foods Ethnic aisle?!

\*\*\*\*

At the end of the day, what am I?

Excuse my language... really.... Fuck the *what*.

\*\*\*\*

I cannot be explained. I cannot be reduced to a definition. I am not this nor that, and both. I have no known origin. No certainties. No salient traits. I am fluid, subject to interpretation. Discuss and analyze, the motives, the form, the process. Try really hard. I am water with a face, sand and

spices in fist, slipping,

slipping

out... Explain me.

Pin me,

I hardly know myself.

*How can we?*

I have found myself on a journey for an “ethnic core.” It is a narrative of longing, a narrative of learning and a story of creating myself. In this process of creation, I confront the objectifying question “What are you?!”. I have internalized it in such a way that I have become consumed by the question, “Who am I?”. As a result, I’ve found myself on an endless journey to find that “who” through others.

From the beginning of my communication with my father and subsequently countless paternal family members, I began to acquire all knowledge I could on Saudi culture. I even enrolled in a course on *intercultural communication* to understand how to move through this challenge to make connections and establish relationships cross-culturally. Among the many

nights in the library, internet searches and personal blogs written by Saudis or American expats in Saudi Arabia, I discovered a blog titled “Saudi Children Left Behind” (SCLB). Although never a participant, I have observed this blog, reading its contents now for three years. On it, I found postings by the mothers of kids, and people like myself (mostly North Americans) who have been abandoned by Saudi fathers. The existence of this blog and its users made me feel no longer isolated by this experience, but curious of why it happens, and question how other “Saudi Children Left Behind” have come to make sense of their identity and themselves.

The experiences and life questions in the narratives presented on the blog resonate with me, and have immensely contributed to the shaping of this study.



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Transnational connectivity is possible today like never before as the boundaries of national, cultural and spatial location are transcended within the global web network.

Cyberspaces have additionally come to provide a safe place and stage for stigmatized identities to be asserted, verified and authenticated (Lasorsa and Rodriguez, 2013). A prime example of transnational connectivity is the blog “Saudi Children Left Behind,” run by an American mother of a child abandoned by a Saudi father. She began the site to publicly shame and call her child’s father responsible for the choice of abandonment. Furthermore, the mother seeks to gain economic and social support for her child as well as social recognition of her child from the paternal side of their family. The blog “Saudi Children Left Behind” has since transformed into a platform that unites people of similar, and what is perceived to be stigmatizing, experiences of transnational abandonment (“Saudi Children Left Behind”). I define transnational abandonment as a condition when at least one biological parent withdraws or does not assume legal responsibility (be economic support or caregiving) for his/her offspring in a transnational context, where the absent biological parent is of a national origin different from that of the child and the other parent. Transnational refers to the idea of blurring of borders with increasing connectivity, distinct from international that emphasizes the idea of borders of nation-states. Transnational abandonment opens up a space in which differently situated actors negotiate the social, cultural, and political implications of their condition (see Keck & Sikkink, 1999). On the blog mothers of abandoned children and adult individuals create posts searching for the

fathers. The blog has gained increased traffic flow from third party internet users as well, from North America, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, who participate on the site not only to search for their fathers but to additionally provide opinion and commentary on the nature of the issue of abandonment, “love children” (illegitimate) or “children of *zina*” (born of adultery), cultural implications of love versus arranged marriage, shaming, and intercultural/interreligious relationships.

As this review of literature will provide, academic research on the issue of transnational abandonment or on the experience and identity negotiation of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers is negligible. Despite minimal research on the topic, the “Saudi Child Left Behind” blog demonstrates transnational abandonment as an important issue as the web has been approached by innumerable people. The location of the web has allowed individuals to share and connect under an experience that may not be possible otherwise or measurable face to face.

My research provides a textual analysis of the computer-mediated-communicative “third space” of the “Saudi Children Left Behind” blog. I examine the posts and comments from individuals who identify as “Saudi Children Left Behind” or, in other words, the biological children abandoned by their Saudi fathers. I use the term “Saudi Children Left Behind” to refer to both the online blog and the children affected by the phenomenon of transnational abandonment by their Saudi fathers. The meaning of father absence is wide and varied, inclusive of nonresident fathers and fathers who have varying degrees of involvement with their child. Paternal deprivation or low paternal involvement in child’s life is believed to have a negative effect on a child’s well-being. Neoconservative studies on father absence argue that father presence is essential to the well being of the child (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999); essentialist ones indicate that father passes on genes to their daughters making them promiscuous

(Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999); phenomenological approaches explore possibilities of an imagined relationship with the father (Harris, 2008). A critical perspective indicates that essentialist and neoconservative positions of fatherhood discursively privilege patriarchy and the nuclear family where father maintains dominance. A few scholars believe that children remain unscathed developmentally as long as they have at least one responsible caregiving parent, regardless of the gender. However, this does not mean father absence should be disregarded, but must be “evaluated on a case by case basis.” For instance, Harris’s study demonstrates that the imaginings were informed by the memory of the father narrated by the mother and nanny, suggesting how the existing family members hold a significant role in shaping the child’s identity. East, Jackson and O’Brien (2006) show how adult daughters understood father absence in terms of a struggle as the desire for a relationship with the father is punctuated by the pain of abandonment. However, little or none has been done on experience of father absence, where the parents are of different nationalities and fathers develop transnational loyalties. The child is left struggling with a multiethnic identity of a complex nature.

The ultimate goal of this study is to provide insights on how the identities of “Saudi Children Left Behind” are discursively produced on a blog. Integrating research on hybridity, multiethnic identity and multiculturalism in the United States, and experiences of Arab-American identity negotiation, I demonstrate the paucity of research on transnational abandonment and aim to explore how transnationally abandoned individuals discursively construct their identity on the Internet.

I draw on research on Arab, Arab-American and Muslim identity. Although all Arabs are not Muslims and all Muslims are not Arabs, I believe that stereotypes and the representation of the Arab or Muslim, be it on the local or global level, reflect upon and influence the lived

experience of one another, including Arab-Americans. I additionally draw upon research on multiracials and multiethnics. Widespread definitions of ethnicity define it as shared customs, language, traditions and ancestry of a group of people, while race is acknowledged as a legal category. However, I undertake Omi and Winant's (1994) stance on race as a formation that is not fixed, but a fluid category that is a socio-political construction. It is consistent with Hall's (1997) view of cultural identities as unstable categories operating on a dialectic between society and self that inform my study:

Identity becomes a moveable feast: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or "narrative of the self" about ourselves. The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily. (p.66)

I therefore, recognize both ethnicity and race as historically and ideologically-situated constructions. The term multiracial excludes minoritized individuals of an ethnic mixture that transcends the categories of black and white, including socially minoritized bodies who are not recognized by the state as a racial minority such as Arabs and Latinos (Al Sultany, 2004, p.145). Ethnicities underscore heterogeneities within a race. As Evelyn Al Sultany (2004) claims, "we

need to revise our ethnic cartography to be inclusive of multiethnic identities” so that we can bridge the gap between how we are socially seen and categorically reduced” (p.147). Since Arab-Americans do not fit into any of the US racial categories, I adopt the term multi-ethnic to be mindful that many Arab-Americans and other non-white ethnics live racially marked lives (Al Sultany, 2004, p. 145; Naber, 2000, p.51). I use the term multiethnic in the Arab-American context to be inclusive of minoritized bodies that are “legally white” because of the available racial schema in the United States, although socially marked as “brown” (Naber, 2000, p.53).

My research is informed by the idea of reciprocity, which connects me in a mutually beneficial relationship to SCLB and allows me to give back to the blogging community through academic research while I learn from them (Konijin, 2008; Goodman 2012). I plan to do this, by sharing my study with the connections I have made through the blog. As a self-identified “Saudi Child Left Behind” I found the experience of abandonment to be isolating. The added racial and political tensions within the United States that marginalize Arabs and Muslims exacerbated the feeling of stigma as a multiethnic Arab (Hasian, 2002). Additionally without the parental support or cultural knowledge to know otherwise, I developed anger and disdain for my own biological father for his absence, and subsequently suspicion of and shame towards Arabs, Muslims and myself. Furthermore, I desire to stimulate a healing in my research endeavors. In a way, it is for me to heal myself. I wish to study, the “parts” that appear foreign and reduce the overall otherness of minoritized and racialized bodies.

The “Saudi Children Left Behind” blog provides a glimpse into this issue showcasing narratives of and about multiple individuals who have been left behind by their Saudi fathers from many generations. Computer-mediated-communication offers means for support and validation not available in face-to-face interactions. Saudi Children Left Behind provides a space

where distance is eliminated, and otherwise isolated experiences enter a space of commonality and support. I hope this study on identity construction of Saudi Children Left behind community will provide an understanding of the complexities of transnational abandonment in general, and transnational abandonment in the context of Saudi heritage in particular. Opening up a new inquiry in the area of identity and culture in the field of communication, my goal is also to contribute to the destigmatization of persons who are transnationally abandoned as well as persons of Arab and Muslim heritage. I hope my study challenges blind celebrations of multiculturalism in the United States that have contributed to a post-race narrative that flattens rather than recognizes difference. I emphasize and support views of multiculturalism that strategize to confront, discuss and understand tension and struggle embedded in identities marked by difference in United States today. In the following literature review section, I delineate multiculturalism and multiraciality.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Moving Beyond Uncritical Multiculturalism and Multiraciality**

In this section, I provide a description of tensions in the negotiation of multiracial and multiethnic identities and problematize the dominant understanding of multiculturalism in the U.S. In order to underscore the imperial logic and intersection of complex power structures in dominant imagery of multiracial identities, I conclude this section with Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity.

In 1993, *Time* Magazine published their special edition entitled "The New Face of America." Draped across the cover was a "multiethnic" image created from an amalgam of people across the following ethnoracial categories: Middle Eastern, Italian, African, Vietnamese, Anglo-Saxon, Chinese and Hispanic ("Rebirth of a Nation"). Inside the volume, an article entitled "Rebirth of a Nation: Computer-Style" presented a grid of these people aligned horizontally and vertically allowing the reader to graze their finger across several combinations to see what particular cross-breeds would look like. Such an article signposted the stereotype of the multiracial as a post-race prophet, summoning a new era of peace and equality. Commenting on the *Time* issue, Danzy Senna (1998) said, "Major news magazines announce our arrival as if we were proof of extraterrestrial life. They claim that we are going to bring about the end of race as we know it" (p. 13). Such media images represent the United States as a seamless "melting pot" which misses the point on multiculturalism as a struggle marked by historicity and complex issues of race and difference (Shome & Hegde, 2002)

Uncritical celebratory representations of hybridity or a fusion of different cultures and identities (Bhabha, 1994), represented by the archetype of multiethnics and multiculturalism in the United States have served as a homogenizing force and an act of hegemony (Kraidy, 2005). This approach has not looked at the cultural heterogeneity of such a demographic nor the racial tensions that are routinely in production. Multiethnics are encouraged to embrace their glory, as the symbolic “progression” of racial relations and increase of multiculturalism in the United States. Such an understanding of multiethnic identity is depoliticized and ahistorical as it exists as a celebratory “lump all” personage where in theory anyone could be multiethnic. Multiethnic becomes an empty and cultureless persona that only unites individuals on the basis of a shared “experience” as multiethnic or multiracial. The homogenization is based on a principle of uncritical inclusion, leveling out differences rather than recognizing and accommodating differences. As a result, multiethnic and multicultural identity is considered to be representative of assimilation, where racial blending could take place to the extent that the multiracial is dissolved into the hegemonic structure adopting dominant values through mimicry and hybridity.

The archetype of the multiethnic or multiracial in the American imaginary is a post-race prophet, the embodiment of racial harmony. For example, fashion images that highlight the ambiguous racial features, establish the multiracial as exotic and desirable (Senna, 1998). These images give the illusion that the representation of the multiracial is positive and, therefore, unproblematic. On the contrary, these images promote color-blind ideology that ceases to look at the history of racial politics within the United States. These images generalize multiethnic bodies into a futuristic concept of a generalizable and empty persona. They obscure the struggle of multiethnics who fight for asserting kinship and cultural affiliation with their chosen ethnic minority groups (US Census Bureau, 2010; DaCosta, 2007; Senna, 1998). Even as the



multiethnics appropriate the values of the dominant culture, they strive to establish their cultural differences and, are involved in an ambivalent negotiation of their identity.

It may be recalled when the lobby for “The Tiger Woods Bill” (created by Thomas Petri), advocated for a multiracial category on the United States Census, it was supported by politician Newt Gingrich. As Gingrich proclaimed his advocacy for the multiracial category, he noted that if he had his way he would have “only one classification—American” (Rockquemore, 2004, p.135). Newt Gingrich’s statement is an expression of ethnocentrism where multiracial is employed as a trope to validate Western culture and invalidate other cultures. The category of “multiracial” therefore serves as a “lump-all” signifier void of any substantial or heterogeneous diversity other than the “shared experience” of racial mixture. One can infer from Gingrich’s statement that the goal of the state is to transform the racial binary from black vs. white, and pure monoracial vs. multiracial eventually to assimilated American vs. evil other. My study aims to disrupt linear construction of multiracialism by bringing to the fore the tensions of cultural differences in multiracial experiences. In order to mitigate these tensions, it becomes important to think of “devising competent media and cultural policies for hybridity to act as a progressive political reality that reduces conflict, and enhances representative democracy” (Kraidy, 2003)

Hence, central to my research is the construct of the multiracial as a racially hybridized person. It is important to situate the multiethnic identity critically in order to disrupt pure celebration of multiculturalism that promotes continued assimilation and disintegration of difference (instead of an accommodation and cultural competency in recognizing difference). For instance, Paul Spickard (2003) theorized that whiteness and multiracial studies run the risk of being sucked into the *whiteness trap*—a trap that views race as only a social construct and tries to enforce a colorblind ideology in its place. He argues that a view of a multiracial identity that is

perceived to be perfectly assimilated with the dominant culture may alienate the multiethnic individual from his/her specific minority rights. The example of Dubois as a multiracial activist is relevant. Even though Dubois could have easily passed as white because of his light skin, he consistently asserted his multiraciality. His seemingly white appearance did not mitigate his effectiveness in serving the cause of African Americans (Spickard, 2003). Dubois' example illuminates that it is important to invoke the multiracial identity as a marker of difference, while working on improving the well-being of a particular community of color. Spickard argues that Dubois' struggle provides an exemplar of how to avoid the *whiteness trap*.

Relatedly, a consequence of framing multiraciality and multiculturalism as representative of national unity and harmony is that we commit the same danger of becoming blind of oppression (Ferber, 2007). Such uncritical celebration brackets discussion of difference and neglects the consequences and particularities of those differences, further depriving the marginalized groups. Such bracketing constantly displaces minoritized individuals within a subordinate status (Fraser, 1992). Although, it is agreed upon that race is socially constructed, in the words of Omi and Winant (2013), race is “real in consequence” (p. 961). Such colorblind and dehistoricized celebrations do not look at manifestations of new racisms as well as the histories that have informed them. Race scholars (Omi and Winant, 1994; Hall 1992) have recognized that historicizing issues of race can help us understand how mixed-race identities are built upon old constructions of race and something new. Racial formation is “a socio-historical process by which race categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 6). The process of dehistoricization situates difference as mere positivity and results in blindness to oppression, “minoritizing logic of domination” (Warner, 2002, p. 167), where those with power control discussion of difference as a means of maintaining that power. Hence,

understanding multiethnic bodies in terms of the universal, also serves to sustain cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 2002). Nakayama and Krizek,(1995) argue that these strategies situate whiteness in the realm of power, tie it to European origins, and view other races as oppositional to whiteness, maintaining whiteness as an invisible privilege and giving it essentialized and scientific values. These strategies have ultimately helped to maintain whiteness as a privilege while marginalizing those who cannot fit into such schemas. Cultural imperialism suggests cultural domination by imposing white and western values and ways of life on members of different cultures (Tomlinson, 2002). It is important to delineate the concepts of hybridity and mimicry in this regard in some detail as they have been widely used to understand cultural imperialism on one hand, and possibilities of resistance to rupture the power of Western hegemony on the other (Bhabha, 1994).

Drawing from colonial experiences, Bhabha (1994) considers the mutual effects of the dominant power and the subjugated other in the ideas of mimicry and hybridity. For instance as the colonized utilize the master's tools and partake in the practice of mimicry, through the presence of their otherness they can only mirror and never fully become the colonizer. Thus mimicry activates slippages in the dominant structure. The excess of the native culture fuses with the dominant values of the colonizer constructing a bricolage between the native culture and that of the colonizer. Bhabha argues that even as the native partakes in the seemingly compliant practice of mimicry, or mirroring that may appease the colonizer, the native enacts resistance. Its excess threatens cultural imperialist agendas and allows a new form of identity to emerge. Despite the resistive potential of mimicry and hybridity, Bhabha overestimates the resistive potential and undermines the dominant power. Bhabha privileges the idea of resistance over complicity in the native's act of mimicry. The native is within a double-bind, in danger of having

no identity but the one afforded to them by the master. The native's identity is only authorized by the master, the colonizer. This process creates, what Minh-ha calls, the "inappropriate other", the other, who resides in a liminal position always on the inside looking out, or the outside looking in, only similar to and never fully equal to one or the other. This "inappropriate other" startles and confuses the onlooker as their authenticity is under surveillance.

Claims to authenticity are a paradox as the authorization of what is authentic for the native is judged by the colonizer, rather than by the native. Bhabha, however, notes coexistence of resistance and surrender in mimicry and constructs a hybrid identity that is ambivalent. The subjugated other attempts to adopt the traits of the dominant to achieve the power of the master. But the process is only partial because a copy can never be original. The process of mimicry thus constantly shifts the identity of the dominant power as it never allows the other to completely appropriate the qualities of the dominant. Such identification with a hybridized identity, therefore, becomes an act of power itself capable of further distancing the hybridized or multicultural identity from affiliation with the dominant identity.

In this study, I depart from the continued celebration of hybridity as a purely cultural and racial concept and attempt to situate it as a by-product of a network of contexts and power structures. Hybridity must be understood as an act of hegemony, and not only a choice of one's agency (Kraidy 2002; Kraidy 2005). A critical approach to understanding racial hybridities, cultural hybridities and hybridity as a practice of hegemony could provide an answer (Kraidy, 2005). Recognizing hybridity as a communicative practice advances an understanding that "hybridity is always articulated with hegemonic power. Our, attention, then, needs to be redirected...to analyzing how hegemonic structures operate in a variety of contexts to construct different hybridities" (Kraidy, 2002, p.14). Understanding hybridity as a *practice of hegemony* is

useful to the extent that it illuminates the interstitial and complex workings of power in transnational contexts that “ostensibly declare themselves non power zones of cultural mixture” (p.15).

It may be noted that the concept of hybridity takes us away from simplistic essentialist positions to more subjective understandings of identities in the transcultural context (Kaplan, 1994) with its emphasis on multiple identities. Embracing multiple identities provides a more holistic understanding of power as it is divested from a *politics of location* where place and origin, literally and metaphorically, is not easily traced within the transnational context. Furthermore, multiple identities allow individuals to become accountable for communities with similar identifications and may promote solidarity or coalition building with a particular group individuals choose to be affiliated with. Multiple identities switch their salience upon context and interaction with others (Grewal, 1994) underscoring the presence of ambivalence as suggested by Bhabha. In sum, hybridity is produced at the intersection of a network of complex power dynamics that constitute competing ideologies. It is important to emphasize the power dynamics in hybrid identities in order to recognize the historicized struggles as well as subjective experiences. For example, in *Like trails of Ndinna*, Savageau (1995) writes about her experience of privilege and marginalization as her body itself is brought into a struggle between past and present. Her Indian ancestry and French ancestry are at tension with one another, her body part native and part colonizer, her tension representative of the French-Indian war:

We're French and Indian like the war

my father said

they fought together

against the English

and though that's true enough

it's still a lie

French and Indian

still fighting in my blood.

Add a transition

In the following section, I highlight the struggles and tensions faced by multiracial identities.

### **Multiethnic Experiences and Micro Aggressions**

Multiracial studies have often generalized a large and growing heterogeneous group of peoples of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds into a homogenous whole.

As the American imaginary has largely understood race through these bifurcated black and white categories, other minoritized identities have largely been left out of the discussion, including multiethnics (Al-Sultany, 2004). Additionally, conceptualization of multiracial has been reduced to misconceptions of multiracials as only bi-racial person of black and white background with presumed monoracial parents (Al-Sultany, 2004). In order to disrupt such linear depiction of multiracial identities, I provide a few examples of multiethnic experiences from academic research that notes the tensions and nuances of being marginalized.

There are quite a few expressions of struggle of multiethnics in scholarly literature. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1999) reflection and affiliation as a *mestizo*, where "Mestiza undergoes a struggle, a cultural collision" (p. 80), is perhaps most noteworthy. Anzaldúa's intersectional experience as a lesbian, multi-racial woman, allowed her to develop a consciousness of the power systems that constrained her identity:

"As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there

is the queer of me in all races. I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenged the collective cultural/ religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture...” (p. 80-81).

Anzaldua (1999) dis-identifies with her imposed racial categories of white and the androcentric histories of Indo-Hispanics and Anglo cultures. Anzaldua’s dis-identification takes a new form of agency that claims a new identity and new culture for herself. Another example of multiethnic identity is present in Cherrie Moraga’s (1999) *Towards a New consciousness (or La Guera)*. As Moraga writes “my brother’s skin was white, mine brown”, she expressed how her identity as a Chicana was closely tied to her affiliation with her minoritized identity as a multi-ethnic Chicana (p.94). Moraga describes her identity as arising from this location of marginalization and not from a specific and cohesive familial and encultured identity as Chicana. Likewise, Martinez (2002) discusses her childhood identity as white, a “conditioned whiteness” in spite of her Chicana heritage. Without any knowledge of Spanish language and being a middle-class privileged individual, Martinez did not recognize her own Chicana identity. It is through persistent questioning of “hovering, never real, only surreal” and proximities to Mexican Americans that she recognized her heritage. Martinez later recognized that her families’ desire for social mobility was the reason for distancing from a minoritized identity of a Mexican-American (p.71). Martinez reimagines her ethnic identity as Chicana and embraces her own location at the margins. It is through her personal will that she chooses to identify with a particular community (p.72). The authors articulate the power relations embedded within systems of race, class, gender and sexuality. For each, their marginalized position ruptures a space that allows for creation of a politicized identity.

However, hybridized identities are not only avowed, but ascribed and imposed as they are

negotiated within interaction with others, and sometimes even enact micro aggressive violent acts. Micro aggressions, in the context of multiethnicity, can be defined as ethnically/racially discriminative acts that affect psychological and emotional health of multiracial individuals (Johnson & Nadal, 2013). Microaggressions take multiple forms in families—being singled out because of belonging to a particular race, isolation from family members, interrogation of one’s racial validity and authenticity, being regarded as monoracial by monoracial family members, being pressured to choose a monoracial identity, incurring emotional stress for not having adequate family knowledge (on both sides), and being objectified by physical appearance (Johnson & Nadal, 2013, p. 126)

Microaggressions depict some of the tensions and ambivalences that may arise in multiethnic persons as their identities are continuously questioned and displaced and are contingent upon context. Additionally, micro aggressions in multiethnic individuals are possible when society is unable to categorize persons within their existing perceptual schemas. Al-Sultany (2004) claims, “Multiethnic identity comes as a surprise and danger within this framework as people attempt to place us, to make sense within the schemas available for understanding people and our world. Our identities transgress the constructed categories and become threatening” (p. 298-295). When individuals cannot be racially categorized, such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and a crisis of racial meaning. “Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity,” argued Omi and Winant (2013, p. 60). This sense of lack of racial identity poses the risk for a multiethnic individual of having no acceptable identity, which then becomes a provocation for him/her for making an identity into a possibility.

The presence of micro aggressions and multiethnic experiences are expected to play out in multiethnic experiences of individuals in the context of transnational abandonment. Similar to



children of transnational adoption, whose experiences have not been understood in terms of hybridity or identity labels (Brodzinsky, 1990; Kim 2007), the experiences of children of transnational abandonment have not been brought under the preview of critical cultural studies, let alone concepts of hybridity. It is relevant to understand the phenomenon of transnational abandonment through the lens of hybridity and multiracial experiences because abandoned individuals negotiate the part of their racial identity that they inherit from the abandoning parents in a complex manner (Brodzinsky, 1990; Kim 2007). The challenges of negotiating identities for transnationally abandoned individuals are of enormous difficulty because they do not have access to kinship or family or language or culture of one of their parents. From my own experiences, I know that that such absence of access could make the ethnic identity more haunting, of more salience, and more imagined. But as mentioned earlier, little research has been done to understand this experience and its implications. In the following section, I elucidate the possible issues related to Arab-American identity, which is the case in point for this study.

### **The Case of the Arab-American: Legally White and Socially Brown**

Arab-American studies has largely focused on Arab-American identity in terms of its affiliation to family, kinship and language. Only a few studies have focused on the Arab-American experience in relation to issues of race. Explanation for this paucity could be the “honorary white” status of Arabs, as Arabs are considered an ethnic group and not recognized as a racial category on the U.S Census. I will highlight some of the relevant findings on Arab-American identity from the perspective of race.

In view of the racial constructs in the United States as a binary between black and white, while Arabs are considered to be in between the binary, the “honorary whites” (Fadda-Conrey, 2006, p. 205). Similar to the Middle-Easterners, there are other groups that are considered

“white” and that are lost between such binaries such as “South Asian Americans who are at best cast as extras or left out entirely” (Omi and Winant, 2013, p. 968). Therefore, those who are considered to be white by the U.S Census, the authors argue, can be victims of racism as well.

What is important for understanding Arab identities is a knowledge of the history of the conflict between the East and the West to demystify the stereotype of Islam as conflictual with the West and with what is considered to be modernization (Khiabany, 2003). Islam itself is regarded as a cultural concept that binds people of a culture to an ahistorical past. The heterogeneity of Muslim identities is thus homogenized into a Western portrayal of what is deemed as Islamic, and framed as an antithesis to normative Western, male and Christian identities and, hence, anything that is modern (Richard Dyer 1997; Ferber, 2012). Such conflicts between the East and the modern West create cultural tensions in the United States which marginalize identities who seem to be in opposition to the West. The location of the Arab identity at the margins of the “white” category renders it as legally “white” and socially “brown” (Naber, 2000, p.51). Some Arab-Americans strategically resort to passing as they “introduce themselves according to non-Arab racial/ethnic labels, such as Greek, Italian, Puerto Rican, or generically American to avoid the stigmatization often associated with the label ‘Arab.’” (Naber, 2000, p. 15). Passing was occasionally noted among Arab-Americans living in New York City post-9-11 (Bayomi, 2009). Some Arabs had changed names and adopted an “ex-Arab” identity, going to such extremes as to change their name to pass as Latino (Bayomi, 2009, p.11).

However, visual ethnic presentation may not allow their passing as white (Naber, 2000). The Arab-American identity assumes more complication when the racial status of an Arab-American is assumed to be synonymous with Muslim. The otherness of Islam is in violation of Christonormativity that is assumed to be aligned with Americanness. Naber (2000) claims that

Arab-Americans are racialized through religion rather than phenotype (p.53). Therefore, symbolic relation of Arab with Islam actively *browns* Arab-Americans. Allegiance to Islam is typically blamed for irrational and poor behavior of Arabs in popular media, many of whom are shown as engaged in prayers before conducting a violent act. Henceforth, it is assumed that all Arabs are Muslims, and therefore Arabs are inferior to Americans (Naber, 2000, p.53). Al-Sultany (2012) draws attention to advertisements with Arab-Americans that display “I am American and I too am Muslim.” The portrayal of a patriotic Muslim creates a dichotomy between a good Muslim and a bad Muslim (p.168). Al-Sultany, most importantly, notes the flaw that most media portray Arabs and Muslims within the context of terrorism. “Representations of Arabs and Muslim identities in contexts that have nothing to do with terrorism are strikingly unusual in U.S commercial media” (p.165). Furthermore, Al-Sultany argues, the representations that appear resistive to portrayals of the problematic and stereotypical “good” and “bad” Arab create the illusion of the United States within a post-race era, devoid of discrimination. These portrayals do not interrogate stereotypes, but simply provide a new representation, never giving a critical look at difference or at the discussion of marginalization of Muslims and Arabs. These modes of portrayals show inclusion without a responsibility of having to accommodate difference.

Portrayals of patriotic Muslims work to show compatibility between Muslims and American ideology rather than expressing them at odds with one another. Furthermore, such media representations provide Muslims with a narrow option to achieving recognition as American citizens, where they must assimilate into the existing “American” values framed as conservative, patriarchal, heteronormative and nationalistic. Post 9-11 society has resulted in increased xenophobia and immigrant bodies are perceived to be violent and contradictory to

Western codes of conduct. Such is the stereotype that an individual's decision to convert to Islam or "going Muslim" is considered to be synonymous with "going terrorist" (qtd., Bayomi, p.160). Scholars (Rivera, 2014) have noted a historical shift in culture that produces new consequences for Arabs and Latinos in interchangeable ways. Latinos as immigrants have been perceived as threats to the U.S security similar to the threats posed by Arab immigrant bodies. At the same time both ethnic groups have been offered the choice of white status by the US Census. In the first wave of Arab immigration to the United States during the Syrian-Lebanese war, the court trial *Dow v. United States* fought for "white status" (Books, 2011, p.29). Although this identification may have been viewed as productive, Orientalist imagery still persisted against Arabs as a minoritized group and anti-Arab and Muslim imagery has escalated in the second wave of Arab immigration and continued in the current third wave, exacerbated by 9/11 (Tehrani, 2009; Gualtieri, 2009, p. 187- 190).

Much debate and research has concentrated on the need of recognizing Arab Americans as a racial and ethnic category, despite hesitation by some who do not want to perpetuate the system of difference. For instance, while the Census is capable of providing legal protections and affirmative action for recognized minority groups, it is also a system of othering, marginalizing and homogenizing via pan-identifying ethnic groups. Pan-ethnicity can be understood as movements to homogenize otherwise diverse groups into a single category bound by ethnic proximity and/or shared group interests and solidarity with one another (Okamoto, D., & Mora, G., 2014). Pan-ethnic racial categories themselves can signify integration and assimilation, in consequence leveling out difference and creating a false illusion of shared cultural meanings among an otherwise diverse group (Espiritu, 2001). Arab-Americans have resided on the margin of whiteness. Such a margin has been a signifier of the invisible status of Arab-Americans, who

may routinely experience being socially “brown” and legally “white.” The racial formation of Arabs in America is “an unfolding, ongoing, contextual, and socially constructed process” (Cainkar, 2006, p. 246).

Despite their legal white status, there is no doubt that Arabs are a minority group that is racialized, as proven by “persistent, negative media representations, denial of political voice, governmental and non-governmental policies targeting their activism, and distortions of Arab and Muslim values, ways of life, and homelands” (Cainkar, 2006, p. 251). On the U.S Census, the only category other than “White” that may apply to Arabs is “Other.” The decision between “White” and “Other” for Arabs is not a straightforward one. “[W]hen Arabs select the white box it does not necessarily mean that they identify with whiteness. But when they check “Other”, they know that they have become lost, paradoxically hidden yet the object of social obsession” (Cainkar, 2006, p. 268). In other words, Arab-Americans negotiate their white status with ambivalence.

In an ethnography by Cainkar (2006), when asked how they identified with their white status, the Arab-American participants approached the question with ambivalence. Their uncertainty stemmed from a number of reasons—they were not treated as white post 9-11 because of their variation in skin pigmentation, and their cultural difference distinct from European culture. The findings showed that religion also significantly influenced their choice of “Other” in the racial category of the U.S Census suggesting that race is experienced differentially by different people, religion being one of the many influences behind choice of racial status (Cainkar, 2006). In general terms, the cultural experiences of Arab-Americans determine their choice of the category of the “other” (Witteborn, 2007). However, academic studies have largely focused upon “linguistic, cognitive and emotional otherness” (p.559) and have not adequately

acknowledged otherness from the perspective of marginalization of Arab-Americans.

There are a number of identity markers that affirm the experience of otherness for Arab-Americans. Many reject an ascribed identity, many refuse to allow the Arab identity to be salient, many emphasize only the American part of their identity, and many others question the stereotype. The Arab-Americans switch their affiliations and labels depending upon situation, space and audience, which typically characterize experiences of hybridized identities (Witteborn, 2010). For instance, Witteborn argues, the identity markers invoked by Arab-Americans pre and post 9/11 are found to be markedly different, which demonstrates the significance of context in negotiation of hybrid identities. Before September 11, national affiliations (labels such as Palestinian) were important. However, collective identity labels such as “Arab-American,” signifying a pan-ethnic alignment, found increased salience post-9/11 and labels such as Muslim became more pronounced to resist orientalist and stereotyped imagery as terrorist, evil or barbaric (p.91). The emergence of a pan-ethnic Arab-American identity as a politicized and organizational collective pushing for increased visibility and positive representation of Arab communities (p.95) shows the shifting nature of identity, and also demonstrates the ethnic dimension arising through the racial tensions within the United States (Witteborn, 2010). However, it is important to recognize that even in the pan-ethnic Arab-American collective identity, there are “multiple national, ethnic, and panethnic identity dimensions” (p.96).

As explained above, Arab-American identity labels shift and the collective identity represents familial affiliation as well as a political title. The misrepresentation of Arab Americans as white has impeded their advancement and failed to protect Arab-American rights (Naber, 2000). The legal framework and social expectations make their identity negotiation an enormously complex process. Research on multiethnic Arabs as a generalizable group is

negligible, as narrow ethnic and racial cartographies have not allowed for research on multiethnic identities that transcend such lines (Al Sultany, 2004, p. 147). Al Sultany advocated for inclusion of multiethnic identities such as her own Arab-Latina identity “that are not acknowledged by racial categories, nonetheless...[they] undergo a process of racialization in the United States” (p.145). Given the negligible research in the area, a brief mention of the experiences of identity negotiation of a couple of multiethnic Arab scholars, namely, Evelyn Al-Sultany (2013) and Lisa Majaj (1994), along with Kraidy’s (2005) research on Maronite youth is relevant for this study.

Al Sultany (2013) provides insight on her personal experience as a “multi-ethnic” Latina and Arab-American of Cuban and Iraqi descent. She gives a personal account of how her identity as *both* Iraqi and Cuban and American is invalidated as individuals “mono-racialize” or “other” her to their own interests (p. 107). Similarly, Majaj (1994) discusses her experience as a multiethnic having an American mother and a Palestinian father. When Majaj returns to graduate school she abstains from making friends with native Arabs and speaking Arabic in fear of being othered as Arab and more so as a Palestinianian. Majaj, who phenotypically appeared white, adopted passing as a means of protecting herself from potential exclusion. Al-Sultany and Majaj’s narratives serve as an entry point into the identity of multi-ethnic people of Arab heritage, each uniquely distinct. One tells a story of her invalidation of self by others, the other describes a painful rejection of self in fear of others. One negotiates microaggressive act, the other fears the potential consequence of violence of such acts.

However, a deeper and more complex understanding of such ambivalences, tensions, and struggles for a cultural core and more authentic self demands further exploration. Although I recognize that ethnicity and race are socially constructed concepts, struggles and appeals for a

more culturally and racially authentic self are real consequences of such constructions. In Kraidy's (2005) research on Maronite youth from Lebanon, he found that hybridized identities drew on influences outside of cultural space such as media. The Maronite group navigates the difficulty of creating borders and seeks to develop an understanding of a particular ethnicized identity. Maronite is a group of debatable Arab ethnicity, and appears to be located at the margins of Arab ethnicity in Lebanon because of their largely Christian population, which gives them a second-class status within Lebanon. They fell "simultaneously on two sides of the symbolic fault line" as they conditionally identified with Western and Arab cultures. Borrowing from Said, Kraidy called this a negotiation between "dialogical counterpoints" where, rather than having an identity divided and in competition with itself, focus was on the conditional negotiation of identity across context. In this instance, Kraidy (2005) theorized hybridized identity as an identity that is "a refusal to make definitive identity choices... a quotidian vicarious inevitable condition" (p. 148). Such a view of hybridized identity reaffirms the fluid nature of identity, complicates and disrupts claims to authenticated identities, and opposes linear binaries.

The experiences documented above will significantly inform my study on negotiation of hybridized identities in the context of transnational abandonment.

### **Summary**

Given the omnipresence of stereotyped media representations of Arabs which influences the experiences of Arab-Americans, it is important to pay attention to the narratives of ambivalence and hybridity by this group of multiethnic and multicultural Americans. The American dominant discourse constantly displaces multiethnic and multicultural identities of Arab-Americans into the category of "Other" and into a liminal position of "neither here nor there" invalidating them as an authentic cultural group (Turner, 1969, p.259).

Multiracial and multiethnic identity negotiation becomes even more complex in the context



of transnational abandonment. Similar to transnational adoption that also involves absence of biological parents, transnational abandonment brings forth ambivalent experiences of race and culture not having the knowledge of language and culture of one or both parents. The complexities involved in transnational abandonment make it a challenging area of research (East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2007). Nonetheless, issues of transnational child abandonment and their multicultural upbringing have not yet found a place in academic research. As is evident from the narratives on the website *Saudi Children Left Behind*, multiethnic Arab-Americans abandoned by their Saudi fathers are doubly invisible. They are not recognized by the Census as an ethnic group, and they are not recognized by their fathers. These identities are embedded within a hegemonic structure and conflicting transcultural dynamics that I aim to explore in this study. Online spaces are well-suited to understand identity negotiation by multicultural groups because they are considered to be “third spaces” that allow emergence of unique cultural discussions and identities.

Drawing from studies on multiethnic identity and hybridity and Arab identity, I establish the need for research on the topic of transnational abandonment, particularly on the abandoned children of Saudi fathers. The proposed study seeks to make sense of the experience and identity negotiation of multiethnic individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers as well as the political, social, cultural, and racial dimensions that influence their lives. Based on data provided by mixed methods of textual analysis of the “*Saudi Children Left Behind*” blog, autoethnography, and interactive interviewing with participants who identify as “*Saudi Children Left Behind*,” I aim to examine the communication processes involved in the identity negotiation of multiethnic Arabs, who typically remain invisible and silenced in academic research. With that said, and informed by the existing literature, I propose the following tentative research question that guides my

study: RQ: How are the identities of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers discursively produced on a blog?

## CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY ON A BLOG

### Textual Analysis as Method

The “Saudi Child Left Behind” blog exemplifies a motif of transnational abandonment as its location on the web has allowed for persons to share and connect under an experience that may not be possible or measurable face to face. Therefore, I employ textual analysis of the Saudi Children Left Behind blog to address my research question.

A critical reading of multiculturalism and hybridity recognizes the interwoven and interlocking systems of oppression influenced by nation state, race, imperialism, and the global nature of the world (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994. p.4). Such a perspective offers the ability to conduct a reading of the SCLB blog as a hybrid media, cyber text that is a transnational space and a site of multi- directional flows (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, p.8).

Cyber space itself has evolved as a medium that allows for transcultural communication within a sphere unmarked by boundaries, but marked by ideological struggle. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002) textual analysis offers the ability to make sense of these layers and layers of discourse and social action and, in particular, in CMC contexts, provides a framework to make sense of identity, relationships and community. In my reading, I view and recognize the “Saudi Children Left Behind” blog as a discursive space of identity construction and as a site of struggle between the Arab and Western world. This is exemplified as the “cacophony of advice” directed at mothers and SCLB individuals (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002, p. 252) permeate though the entire site.

Taking an inductive approach to coding and finding themes, I adopt Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) textual analysis as method. Textual analysis is a two-step process which first decontextualizes raw data through a labeling process called coding, then recontextualizes data through a process of categorization by creating linkages and defining relationships among codes to help discover emergent themes and concepts (p. 265). Textual analysis is a departure from traditional content-analysis which produces codes based upon the quantifiable recurrence of patterns and what is said. Textual analysis provides a close reading to identify the latent meanings within a text (Hall, 1980).

I first approached the data through a "long preliminary soak" to familiarize myself with the emerging patterns in the content and maintain the integrity of the "big picture" before proceeding in my close reading and coding process (Hall, 1975). For my analysis, I was primarily interested in how the identities of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers are discursively produced through language on the blog. From my soak, I realized that several posts on the SCLB blog were written by recently deserted mothers' on behalf of their young preschool and toddler aged children. But I was particularly interested in analyzing threads that included the voice of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers who were old enough to participate in the discussion and have chosen to search for them. Hence, I narrowed my focus to six posts and their threaded comments that included a broader scope of voices and subjectivities that I felt was necessary for this study. In sum, this data sample amounted to 6 posts, 242 comments and 132 pages of written content. Five of these six posts addressed young adult to adult individuals (ages 17 and up) who were identified as searching for their Saudi fathers. One post offered a general discussion on the sensitive issue of father abandonment and what I consider to be provocative and important comments regarding adults who are currently searching for their Saudi fathers, as

well as “advice” from mothers, and comments from third party users evaluating the validity of their search.

More specifically, I relied on a thematic analysis based on the grounded theory approach. The overarching question that guides the analysis is: How do individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers discursively construct their identities in the United States? Based on this inquiry, the chosen content of the blog is grouped and regrouped in terms of categories and emerging themes with the goal of understanding the discursive constructions of identity in the context of transnational abandonment. These discursive constructions create a space for understanding how SCLB communicatively make sense of a number of issues surrounding abandonment by Saudi fathers. I began the thematic analysis starting with open coding to identify discrete concepts that could be easily labeled and sorted; subsequently, I grouped discrete concepts that related to the same phenomenon under conceptual categories. Open coding was followed by axial coding which involves the formulation of relationships within and among categories; finally, I achieved theoretical integration through selective coding (see Appendix A). From this process I found 177 open codes and 37 axial codes. As grounded theory approach suggests, theory is grounded in the themes. Three themes emerged from my textual analysis of the narratives of individuals (or their mothers) searching for their Saudi fathers on the blog: a) (Il)legitimacy and letting it go, b) Presence, absence and difference; and c) Negotiating relations and weighing the outcomes.

I note a couple of issues about the blog that may have constrained the scope of the data. First, although commenting is open to all, posts are restricted. The site is managed by an administrator who posts the narratives of SCLB and their mothers and the administrator has not made a new post since 2013. Some self-identified SCLB comment to inquire about getting their story posted. Secondly, the six posts I selected included comments in Arabic as well as English

language. Due to my lack of proficiency in Arabic language, these comments were discarded from my analysis.

## **Analysis**

Using textual analysis, I examine how identities of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers are discursively produced on the Saudi Children Left Behind blog through the lens of hybridity and multiculturalism. Three themes emerged from my textual analysis of the narratives of individuals (or their mothers) searching for their Saudi fathers on the blog: a) (Il)legitimacy and letting it go, b) Presence, absence and difference; and c) Negotiating relations and weighing the outcomes.

### ***Theme One: (Il)legitimacy and Letting it Go***

The Saudi Children Left Behind blog displays contradictory emotions and tensions as the users seek to gain attention of their fathers and familial tribes and the commenters respond to them in multiple ways. Although the users of the Saudi Children Left Behind blog use this medium to reach out and gain recognition from their fathers, often their postings are also understood as “shaming” their biological fathers and their respective families. Commenters from Saudi Arabia advise against shaming and caution that publicizing such issues may carry harsh consequences such as destroying their father’s reputation and family honor, or even leading to the potential death of the father. Often, the only way to address shame in Saudi Arabia is to “make him history”, commenters write.

The bodies of individuals left behind by their Saudi fathers are read as “illegitimate” by commenters from Saudi Arabia. Illegitimate children (born out of marriage) are referred to by some as “children of zina” (born out of adultery), which carries a heavy stigma. Legitimacy of

children is determined by whether parents were wed before conception. For some, legitimacy can only be accorded when parents are wed in a proper Islamic ceremony. By condemning their social and legal status, some users support these children being brought up by their single mothers and go so far as to discourage them from their search. Many users point out that under Islamic law illegitimate children are not deserving of inheritance of property from their father, only of that of their mother. For instance, one commenter who claims to know the identity of a father being sought out says, “Your father is a millionaire but you have to accept that you are an illegitimate child. Sorry to break it to you. Best of luck.” This type of remark seeks to absolve the father from responsibilities of parenthood as well as accountability for abandoning their child and discourages the child from seeking out their father. The entire scope of parental responsibility is placed onto the mother, while the label of “illegitimate” becomes a marker of identity for the child. Ascribed this *inferior* status, their bodies become metonymies for carnal sin, a stigma that cannot be overcome however ubiquitous it may be.

Conservative ideologies that reduce SCLB bodies to products of sin are met with counter-arguments, including this one from another user, “your comment is inappropriate, there’s no such thing as illegitimacy in God’s eyes so try again...”. One user, who found their Saudi father after relocating to Saudi Arabia states snarlingly, “When you go head to head with these guys they will do whatever it takes to protect their reputation and family from public embarrassment. Which we are because we are their sin incarnate (laugh).” Father and familial reputation are revered to a higher degree such that father’s choice of abandonment and continued rejection of the child are condoned. Furthermore, the children are accused of not only representing a sin, but they are also viewed as potentially dangerous. The stigma of their illegitimate status is seen as

transmittable that may infringe upon their biological fathers and paternal families by mere association. For instance, as one user informs Joshua:

Please listen to me carefully. Joshua, In Islam, this is not your father. You must be with your mother. So, he did the right thing. Please, do not destroy his reputation. And, live your life because what he did (if he did) is a sin in the past and in his society is a shame. If you think the above story is true. Please do not look toward the past. Please Joshua omit this page as soon as possible.

In this excerpt Joshua is reminded that he is a living memory and embodiment of his parent's sin. He is warned that meddling with the past bears the consequence of casting shame upon his unknown father and father's family, as his very presence is evidence of moral misconduct. Despite being victims of abandonment, the SCLB discourses of commenters generally condemn their visibility and consider them as trouble-makers. They are blamed for tarnishing their paternal families' honor. By silencing the voice of the abandoned individual the only choice made available to fathers is to foreclose all possibilities of a relationship with the child. Of importance here is how SCLB identities become fixed within a subordinate position impossible to triumph above. Their identity goals to connect with the paternal heritage and relationship with their fathers are made inappropriate and socially unacceptable. Asserting an agency that makes themselves visible poses a risk for the father, and carries consequences of disdain from their fathers and families. While SCLB perceives recognition of their existence as a right, their illegitimate status is regarded as transgressive of Saudi norms by the commenters. This discursive act locates their identities as erased and forgotten.

In contrast to marking the individuals with the stigma of being illegitimate, other commenters remark that abandoning a child is disgraceful, "How could someone leaves his



family behind and lives (sic.) in peace with himself! (sic.)”. The term of “illegitimate” also becomes a subject of debate. Site users argue with one another on what can be considered as “Islamic rules”.. The heterogeneity of Saudi culture becomes evident as many articulate the idea of integrity and inclusiveness of Islam:

love your story :) i find offense if somebody generalizes; not all Saudies are like that Yes, i have to say some can be unbelievable but not always. I’m an American Saudi I was raised in Saudi Arabia with my dad who is Saudi & he loves me so much I can’t describe his care for me: ) I also meet a lot of women who are involved with Saudies & their men treat them well mashallah.. point is when a person is a real muslim, he realizes that he or she has a responsibility to take because Islam always encourages good behavior (Islam is perfect, Muslims are not) thanks again would love to chat...

As the above excerpt suggests, ascribing abandoned children as illegitimate is a subjective interpretation of scripture that ignores cultural heterogeneities and patriarchal liberties not actually authorized in Islam. Furthermore, some consider abandoning one’s child as disgraceful and against Islamic law, and underscore children’s well-being and commitment to the family as more significant rather than shun children on the ground of illegitimacy. “Gentlemen- if you fear allah and the last day acknowledge and support your children. Period” and “How could they leave their kids fatherless! Godless!! This is really unbelievable and against Islam teachings.” Such comments correlate the role of the father with moral virtue. The child is “godless” without the father’s guidance regardless of the father’s aberration in moral judgment. This is an interesting position as fathers are framed as in need of maintaining their moral virtue (by remaining connected with their child). Yet comparing them to God, they are deemed to be in possession of moral virtue, a quality denied and deficient in the abandoned child. These

dispositions underscore male privilege and establish a patriarchal view of what can be considered a moral upbringing for children, where the mother is deficient and inadequate.

I want to highlight here that child abandonment and children born out of wedlock occur throughout the world, in a variety of contexts and is not a particular practice of Saudi men, Saudi culture or an occurrence that happens exclusively in intercultural relationships. For example, in the United States alone 24% of children lived only with their mother in 2009, while 21% lived in mother only homes in 1991 (U.S Census Bureau, 2011). As I pointed out earlier, a number of discourses discourage individuals from pursuing relationship with their fathers because of their illegitimate status. While this classification system privileges legitimate children and subordinates illegitimate children, it does so to sustain moral Saudi hegemony. Discourses on the blog also warn against intercultural relationships between Americans and Saudis. These dispositions become evident in comments that suggest illegitimacy is enabled by exposure to American culture and as a by-product of “forbidden” intercultural relationships. These comments generalize illegitimacy more as an American norm rather than a Saudi phenomenon. For example, ““The problem is most western women are so easy with lack of moral” and:

... in america people are used to having bastards, and ending up supporting them and getting married afterwards because of having a child. But saudi's unlike you have to sacrifice humiliation and abandonment from their whole family back home, because of them committing adultery, and it leading them into a death sentence because of it.

The above comment is sympathetic to fathers and demoralizes mothers, however, even when fathers are perceived as deceptive and morally deviant, some commenters believe the father's Muslim identity makes them morally superior and therefore have a greater responsibility toward their children than do the mothers:

As Muslims they are responsible (sic.) for their actions to an even greater degree than the mushrikun who carry their children. It is NORMAL behavior in her culture- but NOT in YOURS. Also- lets not ignore the deceptive nature of these relationships in many cases.

The man often does many things that signal to a western woman and her family that he is serious about her and her welfare. He meets her parents and family and spends time with them. He makes a home with her. It is completely unacceptable (sic.) behavior.

Most of the comments above juxtapose Saudi Arabia against the West, where the West is considered to be devoid of morality. Furthermore, it is the Western woman, who is viewed as immoral. The identity of the SCLB individual remains indeterminate through the discursive process vacillating between cultural prejudices and assumptions. Even though we can observe instances where child abandonment is portrayed as disgraceful, some insist the father's sin is unforgiveable, and stigmatize the child further. For instance, Doha says, "No matter how many times they make hajj to Mecca Allah will never forgive cheaters or adulterers or con men.

Salman brings shame to his family honor! What kind of man is he fathering a child out of wed lock and then deserting his daughter? Only he has answers!" As long as the child is silenced and forgotten, the father can salvage and escape repercussions for his actions during life on Earth, penalty deferred until their "Day of Judgment." The weight on the parent's act of adultery works to sustain lack of worth of the child, further distancing the potential to recover the father-child relationship and foreclosing possibilities for any reunion.

As long as irreversible sin burdens the parents, the father's need to avoid shame will remain of greater significance than the wellbeing of the child. Privileging the father's need to save face interferes with the child's pragmatic needs for love, guidance, child rearing, and monetary support and continues to interfere with the abandoned individual's desire for

recognition and reconciliation. In cases where the father's responsibility toward the child is revered to a higher degree, by granting the father moral virtue and describing the child as "godless" the commenters demonstrate the underlying ethnocentric assumptions against cultural mixture. Inherent in the statements is the assumption that the American woman as a parent is morally inferior because it is permissible to have a child out of wedlock in the American culture. Culture and gender intersect to relegate the abandoned child to the background. The abandoned child is within a double-bind. Their lack of relationship with their father, and connection to Islam grants them a subservient status lacking moral virtue. On the other hand, seeking their fathers and asserting their visibility are positioned as troublesome because the stigma they carry may infringe upon their fathers and families, disrupting their lives and their moral hegemony as they know it.

Some commenters encourage SCLB individuals to move forward with their lives by investing in their current relationships and themselves as evidenced in statements such as "focus on your religion and yourself" and "Count your blessings. You are a free person". "Letting it go" is seen as the best solution to avoid exposure and risk succumbing to oppressions within Saudi culture as said by American users. These perspectives contribute to reductionist and orientalist conceptions of non-Western cultures as barbaric, ahistorical, uncivilized and oppositional to the West. For example, Diana, an expat living in Saudi Arabia and wife to a Saudi man says:

As terrible as this may sound, your child is better off without a Saudi father around. The majority of Saudi men are ruthless. And those from SW Saudi Arabia are the worst...Do yourself and your child a favor...and move on. The best thing you can do for your own well being. And the best thing to do for your so is to find a good man (non Saudi) who will accept him as his own child.

SCLB search gets framed as unreasonable and what SCLB individuals desire is seen as having no benefits to them. Some are advised to “just let it go” on the basis that the father’s choice of abandonment is unforgiveable and not worthy of the child’s curiosity or desire to open a line of communication. As Hani says:

I am not really sure, but you have to let it go. If he really wants to meet you, he would have made efforts...Believe me, true men don’t leave their kids behind. He is not worth your time or your efforts. You seems that you know nothing about your father, except for his name, assuming it is his true name and his 25 years old picture. Believe me, true men don’t leave their kids behind. He is not worth your time and efforts. You mentioned that he does not owe you anything, he owes you his life. Just let it go!!

The father’s action is seen as an individual case of bad judgment rather than a systemic act that is operating within the socio-cultural pressures and conventions that leave little opportunity to establish a relationship with their child. Focus is given to chastising fathers’ abandonment, and not to SCLB’s goal of seeking communication with and attention of their fathers.

The pressures to “let it go” also underscore a belief that the cultural divide between East and West is too huge to communicate across. Here is Abdullah’s comment to Yahia looking for his father, who left his mother at three months of pregnancy, “I can sadly say one thing: as a Saudi, I assure you that this will almost be the same scenario in 90% of the cases at best and 99% at worst...so prevention is the best cure...keep away from imagining a family life (w/ children) with Saudis out of marriage boundaries”.

“Prevention is the best cure” not only avoids potential conflict, and emotional plights of father’s absence, but also suggests that the costs of miscegenation are too high against dominant

discourses dedicated to preservation of cultural homogeneity and moral hegemony. Even within marriage boundaries intercultural mixture is not suggested,

What is the harm of keeping the relationships limited only on guys who lives the same values and believes as yours? Believe me they are many. They are more handsome in your eyes than the expat!....I will not think to get married from non-Arabic women not because the rest are not good but because our society values are different and the chance the marriage fail is very high.

The voice of abandoned individuals disrupt normative codes. In the meantime, “the best cure” to prevent further disruptions to the status quo requires that SCLB identities must remain invisible and their voices bracketed from discussion. Although encouragements such as “move forward” and “let it go” appear to be advocacy for the well-being of the abandoned individual, they also infringe on SCLB agency to seek communication with their fathers, further silencing their voices. By discouraging the SCLB’s much public and visible approach to catch the attention of their fathers, commenters become complicit with the abandonment of children born out of wed lock, a complicity that serves to sustain the unequal status between *illegitimate* left behind children and their legitimate, monocultural counterparts.

SCLB’s identities constructed through site discourses as “illegitimate” and in need of “letting it go” predominantly signify a “clash of civilizations.” Granting visibility to their voices, or allowing communication with their fathers, the hybrid degenerates risk disrupting the cultural hegemonies. Hybrid degeneracy is a perspective on miscegenation between races and assumes offspring are inferior, biologically and psychologically (Nakashima, 2011, p.171). Although the hybrid degeneracy of SCLB does not arise from biological inferiority in terms of race, their degeneracy comes from potentially mixing the cultural elements that are considered to be

making up East and West. Upon mixture, at risk is the appearance of homogeneity, the reigning dominance of these societies, culturally and ideologically. These dominant discourses that permeate throughout the blog work to constrain, silence and pigeonhole SCLB identities. -On either pole, American and Saudi, SCLB identities become subjected to labels that regard them as inappropriate. They are displaced, at least partially, beyond the Orient as product of sin and beyond the west as the racial Other, which I illustrate in further detail in the next theme) (Minha, 1997).

### ***Theme Two: Presence, Absence, and Difference***

While SCLB's identities are called 'illegitimate', and the search a waste of time, even risky, physical appearance becomes a subject of discussion, which is both a matter of derision and appreciation. For instance, here is Aisha's response to an SCLB's photograph, "I'm so vain! I think Yahia is so handsome, mash'allah. Mixed Saudi children are the cutest babies ever. Hey, if it doesn't workout with their deadbeat fathers, at least you'll have good looking kids with a future in modeling-silver lining? Anyway! Yahia, if you're single, HOOK IT UP PRONTO:)." The comment exemplifies how multiracial identities are considered to be exotic and desirable by virtue of being "mixed." Emphasizing the difference, Aisha's comment ruptures the myth of racial harmony and indicates how racial differences do not simply get assimilated. The worth of SCLB is considered to be void of any value other than producing "good looking kids."

The identities of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers are uniquely characterized by experience of father absence and their difference as ethnically marked persons. Physical appearance becomes one signifier of difference, indicating presence of Saudi heritage. Their bodies and the way they are phenotypically marked link them to an imagined connection with

their Saudi fathers and culture. SCLB become keenly aware of this difference and seek to know, uncover, converse with the absences that hover around them.

It becomes apparent on the blog that SCLB have undergone a process of racialization in their life experience and within the blogosphere. For Adel, he confesses that life is admittedly more difficult under the circumstance of racial marking and father absence. “It’s hard to be of Saudi heritage living in America and to not know where you come from and then you have a father who casts you aside like you are nothing”. It is unclear if his racial marking comes from being phenotypically marked or the Arabic roots of his name or awareness of paternal origin, or all of the above. What is clear are his negotiation with his multiethnic identity, his experience of struggle, and his awareness of his racial difference from the dominant culture. Adel’s comment is largely about gaining the survival skills of navigating an ethnic identity properly in the United States. Aware that his Saudi heritage has marked his identity as “socially brown”, within the American imaginary, his negotiations of identity are made more troublesome without a father’s guidance. To have his father “cast him aside like he is nothing” means that he’s been denied his father’s guidance to deal with his ethnic identity. Nor does he have the cultural knowledge of his ethnic background to claim authority over it. It is his disjuncture, located on the margin in the U.S. with Saudi heritage that creates a crisis of his racial experience. Ethnicity although socially constructed cannot be dismissed as a mere figment of someone’s identity negotiation. Such social constructions bear real consequences for those who become subject to them. Adel’s imagined connection with his Arab heritage ambivalently resists stereotypes and phobic attitudes toward peoples of Saudi heritage. Another SCLB, Laila, acknowledges the phobic attitudes, “I can see how American women are sucked in. I wish there was some warning without coming across prejudice but I feel American women should be warned. Good luck to you.”



One mother, Anne, in one breath emphasizes how pronounced her daughter's racial identity is, "My half Saudi daughter looks exactly like her father... Whenever she is in the mall and Arab women see her they recognize that she is Arabian." In another comment Anne claims her daughter's identity is shaped by her own, "My Irish blood didn't seem to make any difference in the way she looks, but inside she is very much like me." Anne's statement exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) calls "a discourse at the crossroads of what is known as Permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed" (Bhabha, 1994, p.85). Despite her cultural upbringing in North America, Anne's daughter's phenotypically marked body can be understood as an excess, a slippage that places her at the interstices located between not quite white and not quite the Other. Despite being multiethnic of Saudi-Irish heritage, like her mother on the inside, she becomes distinguished by phenotypic excess. Her daughter's maternal identity is concealed by the dominance of her father's features on her exterior—as if a sheep in a wolf's clothing, Anne recognizes her daughter's multiethnicity problematic (the way she looks, and the way she is inside are treated as incompatible). On the contrary, a mother, Sally, a self-identified Christian, describes her daughter, Muneera, in a different way:

Anyone wanting to know about Muneera, she is a very smart and beautiful girl. She has plans to take her education to doctorate school to study psychology. This girl is 100% Arab, she has no American in her, but a small amount of blood. I do have strong faith in her and one day she will receive her goals and plans. Inshallah She is very interested in learning about Islam and Arab culture. So if anyone being of Islamic faith understands u can not take the Arab out of an Arab. Muneera was born to learn of her faith. It is all natural and innocent to this child, and it's wrong for any Muslim to ignore or deny this child of what she wants, a strong relationship with Allah himself"

Sally indicates that it is not only a father that is absent from Muneera's life, but an entire culture. Muneera's desires and longings to know more of Islam and Arab culture are supported with her mother's rationale, "u can't take the Arab out of an Arab. Muneera was born to learn of her faith." Arab as well as Muslim heritage become consecrated as birth rights denied to Muneera in her father's absence. Muneera's identity comes to be understood as fractured, rather than whole and fluid. Muneera's "Arab" is portrayed as a biological truth unwavering by the absence of her father or lack of exposure to Arab and Islamic culture. Muneera's Arab ethnic identity is given salience even though it is imagined and appears all the more real because of the way she is phenotypically marked. Her mother undertakes an essentialist notion of ethnicity as a biological truth and treats ethnicity and culture as intertwined. Ascribed as "100% Arab, there is no American in her, only a small amount of blood", Muneera's minority ethnicity is seen as taking dominion over her body displacing her from owning any American heritage, marking her the incomplete-Other. By considering Muneera "100% Arab", Sally gives primacy to the biological lineage Muneera inherits from her father and articulates the logic of patriarchy in shaping her child's identity.

For many abandoned individuals, developing a racial identity aligned with that of their father (the minority parent) is met with tension because of lack of cultural knowledge about Islam and what it means to be an Arab (the two are treated as mutually exclusive). They discursively construct their ethnic identity as incomplete since they lack knowledge of the culture they ought to embody. The only way they can fill this void is through a transaction of cultural knowledge made possible by opening a line of communication with the fathers. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) describes the Westerner as a cultural broker, one who holds epistemic authority over the Orient (through degrading, perverting, belittling the 'Oriental

Other’). In an age of transnational flows, Said’s proposition of the Orient being represented by a difference that is always in opposition to the West remains as valid. However, what is interesting in this scenario is that the native becomes the cultural broker. The Saudi father’s body is symbolic of both—the Oriental Other and the cultural broker. The native (biological father from Saudi Arabia) is portrayed as the missing link who can impart cultural knowledge to his abandoned child and make his child’s ethnic and cultural identity complete.

Beyond the body as difference, remnants from their father’s past represent a thread that connects them to one another across different spatial and temporal domains. Kraidy (2005) says “hybridity must be understood in its historical depth. In the context of cultural consumption, elements are selectively unearthed from the remembered past and integrated in an unstable present to make sense of that present” (p.146). The SCLB are mindful of their identities as ethnic mixture, and they feel connected because of their absence of cultural knowledge. They provide “narratives of history” and a “remembered past” on the online space to make sense of their subjectivities in the present (cite Hall, 1993).

Family histories and stories help to develop our sense of self and allow us to see how our family’s past influences our present. As Jorgenson and Bochner (2004) state “To a large extent, we [receive] these formative stories passively; they become [our own story], though they are passed on to us by others, usually significant others; often we grow into the stories until they fit as tight and are as unnoticeable as a layer of skin”. The SCLB try to account for and include their fathers and paternal histories into the family archive. However, there is no possibility of any passive reception of the culture with an absentee parent. For SCLB, absence pertains to not having a father and to not knowing an entire culture. Access to father’s culture is denied to them and they express their anxious wait to discover their father’s culture. It is the salience of their

imagined ethnic identities, and their layer of skin, which create a stronger need to reach out for these stories in development of a more coherent sense of self.

Many SCLB come to the blog with scant information on their fathers, and each bit of information they solicit from Saudis who traffic through the site helps them to build a broader narrative of themselves in relation to their fathers than what was previously available. As they invite and welcome their father's influence into their lives by seeking out information, they are also creating memories—some to fill up the past, and others in the hope of creating a future. Goodall (2005) defines narrative inheritance as stories passed down by and about family members. These narratives help to create a framework for us to make sense of our identities and allow “us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means” (Goodall, 2005, p.497). Many SCLB report not having a memory of their fathers at all, their fathers leaving before birth or shortly after toddlerhood. On the SCLB blog narrative inheritance takes form of stories passed down from their mothers and family about the story of how their parents met and their relationship (if any) with them until the point of abandonment. They fill this absence of memory using narrative inheritance and apply these narratives to their search in hopes of finding more clues that will lead them to their fathers.

Not only does their venture for clues help them pastiche a narrative of a more cohesive self, it also becomes an opportunity to “re-authorize” agency and control over their identities. Post-abandonment, narratives come to an abrupt halt, and the ability to re-narrativize provides an opportunity to move in a forward motion toward closure. Bochner (2008) describes the agentic and emancipatory potential in narrative. We become capable of “re-authorizing” our stories and relationships liberated from the past, “Narrative can help one heal the wounds of the past, help

one begin again, to remake, revise, to re-story—to re-fresh” providing us with a greater sense of “continuity, acknowledgement, and hopefulness” (p.1323)

The absence of memory is occupied by imaginings of their fathers, clues they have from names and photographs (some with their fathers, some without) to items inherited from the father. Catherine, having not so much as a photograph of her father, says, “I would be happy with just seeing a picture of him”. According to Roland Barthes, “every photograph is a certificate to presence” and for Catherine, the ability to obtain simply a photo of her father helps to create a memory of her father (she has none), and to substantiate and “ratify” his existence and validate her relation to him (Barthes).

For Catherine, the identity of her father is non-existent without a photograph. In obtaining a photograph, or anything for that matter, she can find certainty in herself. She can, at minimum, recognize and discover her father, his features, and how he bears a resemblance to her. She is thereby forging a stronger connection collecting and archiving information and clues—another way to piece together a more complete narrative. Catherine having never met, touched, heard or seen her father, nevertheless describes a bond to Middle Eastern culture. She is fascinated and drawn to Middle Eastern artifacts. Furthermore, she constructs her own Saudi identity by contrasting it to the one in which she was raised:

I have always wanted to know more about where I come from. I have had an identity crisis being raised in a Western “Caucasian” family that I don’t always fit into. I was told I look just like him—I do not look like my American family at all. And I sense that I am a lot like him. I naturally relate more to the Arabian side than to my mother’s Irish-English side. I love my family but I feel something is missing that is a big part of who I am. I sometimes feel lost because I was not raised in my real culture.

As is exemplified within Catherine's statement, many identities are marked by a search for not only their fathers, but also a search to find their subjecthood and a search to establish an ethnic identity informed by culture. Catherine is conscious about her ethnic difference within the American racial imaginary. The visibility of her Arab heritage causes her to distinguish her cultural identity from that of her mother to such an extent that she describes the contrast as an "identity crisis." Catherine's case represents how absence and presence are mutually exclusive, Who she is, is defined by who she is not. A part of who she is, is not immediately accessible to her. Catherine's "real" culture is "hovering, never real, only surreal" and becomes all the more salient. The inaccessible culture becomes an identifier that she strives to claim (Martinez, 2002, p.71). Although SCLB may not be aware of what it is like to be culturally Saudi, they develop sentiments toward what it is to be Arab in the context of America, that is "the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). By identifying with the term "Arabian", even with the acknowledgement of absence, SCLB not only become subjects of the identity label "Arab" but also become agentive subjects who are attempting to exercise control over their ethnic identities through avowal of that identity.

SCLB individuals strive to assemble a "coherent self" and a stable identity they can qualify with authoritative knowledge (Hall, 1997). In order to assemble a sense of a coherent self they feel that the father must be found, the father must be open to communicating with the child, or other cultural/family information must be found. These connections and leads to their father (be it just a photograph) enable the SCLB to "reauthorize" their narratives (Beverley, 2004). SCLB individuals are aware of the instability of their ethnic identities as they seek to transform their discursively produced incomplete-Other identity into one that is established and informed of what their differences (the imagined "ethnic core" that lies beneath) are constitutive of. By

opening a line of communication with the fathers, the abandoned individuals hold high hopes for developing a more complete “narrative of self” (Hall, 1997).

### ***Theme Three: Negotiating Relations and Weighing the Outcomes***

Although posts by abandoned individuals appear to hold the fathers accountable for their actions it should not be overlooked that the primary incentive of SCLB individuals is not to ruin or shame their fathers, but to forge a connection. Abandoned individuals’ activities on the blog seeking recognition and reconciliation with their fathers provide visibility and an understanding on the issue of abandonment. SCLB discourses on abandonment often come across as a form of resistance against dominant attitudes within the blog that promote cultural tradition and subordinate children born outside of marriage and cultural boundaries. They do not passively accept rejection and discouragement, but resist by demanding communication with their fathers. Many of them indicate that it is their right. This is illustrated by Vanessa’s response to a discouraging remark. “I’ve let it go for 26 years. I have chosen to seek out more information now.” Lisa’s description of her son’s provocation expresses similar emotions. “Throughout the years my son was and still is emotionally hurt and angry that his father never attempted to search for him but now he wants to see his father.”

Conscious of the fragility of the identities they seek to claim, SCLB individuals approach the blog, prepared to negotiate their role and terms of their relationship with their fathers. Some reflect upon unsatisfactory outcomes after making a connection and provide advice. SCLB acknowledge the potentials for disagreement, conflict, and how intercultural differences may bear upon their interaction. For instance, Catherine feels that “knowing her father’s medical history” would be helpful, but also states, “I am okay with the fact that he may not want to know me or acknowledge me. I would be happy with just seeing a picture of him. If we find each other

and he doesn't want to be a part of my life, I am prepared for that." As Catherine illustrates, she has prepared herself for rejection having had nothing before. It is the possibility that motivates her search. Receiving a medical history is a valuable gain that relates directly to what she and her offspring have inherited from her father genetically, whereas a photograph allows her to authenticate their relationship. These reasons do not necessitate sustained communication, but help to fulfill her identity needs.

Another SCLB Vanessa is ready to negotiate a relationship with her father, making it clear that monetary support is not what she is looking for, nor accountability of his actions:

Sadly, my mom is very sick and I was their only child. Soon, I will be alone. That is why I have decided to reach out and try to find my father. I hope that I have brothers and sisters out there and that are willing to meet me. I am not in search of apologies, he owes me none. I am not in search of money, I have my own. I just want to know what happened, to fill a void, a burning question that has left unanswered for 26 years. What happened to him?

Vanessa opens herself up to negotiate a relationship without any expectations of traditional parental responsibilities. These negotiations resonate with Puolo's (2012) concept of "do-over". Puolos uses compassion and forgiveness in conceptualizing the "do-over" rule making it possible to reinvigorate a relationship unconditionally. The "do-over" rule enables the capacity for individuals to exert agency by taking responsibility and control over identity and relationships.

These negotiations challenge uncritical celebrations of multiculturalism that emphasize the cohesiveness, unity and harmony of multiethnics. Uncritical celebrations of multiculturalism portray multiethnic individuals to be in racial harmony based on the assumption that all multiethnic offspring come from loving, complete and unified intercultural families. For SCLB



individuals, this is not the case. Their family upbringings include struggles that deviate from traditional canonical narratives of family (Tillman-Healy, 2001). As a result, their multiracial experiences allow them to develop a consciousness of the dominant narratives constraining their identities (Anzaldúa, 1990).

They approach their negotiations ambivalently, struggling to achieve their desires of connection with their fathers while offsetting their fears of continued rejection by making accommodations. Here is an advice from one of the SCLB for others to abandon high expectations for their fathers: “If they are willing to talk to you then come up with some kind of agreement between you and him and don’t push him for more. Being involved in your life may not be possible so agree to disagree and make the most of what he does offer”. Present here is an awareness of cultural nuances and a preparedness to face intercultural tensions that may emerge within reconnected relationships. For SCLB, their desire for knowledge acquisition and desire for contact with their fathers create an ability, if not greater capacity, to be adaptable and more empathic toward cultural differences. This suggests that it is their urge for an imagined connection to the culture of their heritage that motivates them to learn more and to develop a greater sensitivity to cultural nuances. They grow a willingness to make accommodations.

In the logic of the SCLB individual, sometimes any gain, be it however small, is much greater than what it was preceded by, namely, absence. However, achievement of finding their fathers sometimes results in unsatisfactory outcomes. As Ibrahim shares:

I thought my dad was amazing when I met him and he slammed the proverbial “door” in my face I was shocked and hurt and missed the “dream dad” I used to love and wonder about... You may have a different situation. We can’t say they are all the same... Just

prepare for the worst, read the other stories so you get an idea of what could happen and then hope for the best. Good luck in your search!

Ibrahim offers warning and expresses that despite being hopeful, succeeding in finding his father did necessarily lead to a closure or to a greater sense of being complete. As SCLB comes to function as a space of commonality and support between SCLB individuals advice such as “prepare for the worst” and “hope for the best” highlight the shared risks of making oneself vulnerable and searching for identity relationally; facing rejection from their fathers means a potential stalemate to their quest for identity as a recognized child and Saudi ethnic. When the imaginations they’ve come to identify so heavily with risk being ruptured by a bitter reality, their imagined relationships and identification may only offer them the illusion of having more control, choices and agency over their identity. It may be inferred then that subjecting one’s identity to be recognized by their fathers exposes one to immense vulnerability and an indeterminate nature of identity. Abdullah adds:

I am the son of a Saudi who was on a student visa and left when I was two months old. I found my father one year ago through Facebook and he claims that he has been looking for me my whole life but I don’t feel that way. He will speak to me and then I won’t hear from him for over a month. When we do talk and if I get upset he hangs up and doesn’t speak to me for awhile like he is punishing me. I don’t know what to do because my whole life I looked for my father and now that I have found him its much worse than when I just imagined him.

While a photograph works to authenticate a reality (history) lived by a few SCLB, many others require positive affirmation to defend their fluid identities. As both Ibrahim and Abdullah’s excerpts demonstrate, regardless of their father’s physical absence, they had strongly relied on

reconciliation with their fathers through their imaginings. Eventually, their imaginations fall apart. Their conflict with their fathers becomes a source of disorientation as they try to reevaluate their role and relationship with their fathers and examine its implications on their lives. Such circumstances have led one SCLB to harbor a desire for revenge on their paternal family, while aligning their identity with Saudi culture and avowing a Muslim identity for their self:

I have brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and the whole family know about me. None of them have ever tried to contact me or have anything to do with me. I am waiting for the day he dies so I can attend his funeral. They all know who I am and they can not tell me to leave a funeral. I will sit there. I will stand in the line and take azza for him and no one will say anything. I dare them to. I will have the last stand Inshallah if ALLAH grants it to me.

The blogosphere thus brings forth how SCLB discursively construct multiple subjectivities, and how their imagined connection with their fathers constructs a fragmented identity. Kraidy (2005) describes hybrid identity as characterized by the “inability or refusal to make definitive identity choices”. The SCLB desire to seek their fathers and adopt Saudi heritage stems from expanding their repertoire of choices for performing and defining their identities. The discursive process contributes to dynamic and re-narrativized subjectivities. The intersection of fatherlessness and hybridity calcifies the inability to make definitive identity choices, as the identities sought are made vulnerable in their search, running the risk of continued rejection. What they seek to obtain is fleeting away from them. They negotiate their desire with an apathy to figure out what it all means. Sheba’s story raises awareness:

I went through the same thing and am still dealing with the same thing. I had accepted him out of my life growing up but always wondering what he thought of me or if he

missed me. When we were “reunited” through Facebook 3 years ago, I was met with a huge emotional rollercoaster I had never expected. But I feel I am the “shiny new toy” that has lost its luster already. He rarely calls and when he does he is judgmental and always putting me down or asking me a million questions about my marriage or things I don’t feel are valid. He gets on me for not opening up to him and not always calling him. He never calls me! I am the one who has to put out all of the effort. I have 8 siblings as well I was warmly welcomed to that I have now pretty much been left out to dry. It has unleashed a whole plethora of emotions I wasn’t really prepared to deal with or I even knew existed previously. I am not sure what was the better road for me but I am saddened to hear this has happened to so many others.

For Sheba and a few others, their sense of trust and security in their fathers and paternal families may be viewed suspect, and over time they consider their fathers superficial and insincere. Their warnings suggest that the tensions surrounding absences, and recovering a relationship after years of child abandonment may never settle. These individuals illustrate that a relationship history that includes abandonment (even when one party is forgiving and doesn’t expect an apology) will continue to experience instability. It is within these struggles we can see absence becoming salient—a continuous battle to cope and navigate absence ambivalently throughout their lives.

## **Discussion**

With the goal to challenge uncritical celebrations of multiculturalism and broaden our understanding of how hybrid identities undergo negotiations in the realm of transnational adoption, this study provides a textual analysis of posts on the Saudi Children Left Behind blog

to explore the following research question: How are the identities of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers discursively produced on a blog?

The SCLB blog is a complex hybrid text to analyze—a transnational space with competing ideologies. This study helps us understand the complexities of transnational abandonment, and transnational abandonment in the context of Saudi heritage in particular. I've defined transnational abandonment as “a condition when at least one biological parent withdraws legal responsibility (be it economic or caregiving) in a transnational context where the absent biological parent is of a national origin different than that of the child and other biological parent”. Three themes emerged from my textual analysis of blog post and comments on the topic: (a) (Il)legitimacy and let it go (2) Presence, absence and difference and (3) Negotiating tensions and weighing the outcomes. These themes highlight how conditions of father absence with a parent having a national origin different from one's own has dynamic and conflicting implications socially and culturally, and for production of identities. I enumerate the implications in the following paragraphs and conclude by providing future directions.

SCLB bodies as well as their search are characterized as illegitimate. They become stigmatized for their parents' “sin” of having children out of wedlock. This discovery was surprising as it introduced a paradigm of human classification outside of the formations of race and ethnicity. Illegitimate children were presented as subordinate, they were encouraged to remove their posts, and avoid their search to prevent their stigma from infringing upon the reputation of their biological fathers and paternal families. Although classifications of illegitimate-legitimate have historical roots connected to interpretations of religious scriptures, this matrix serves to sustain both moral hegemony and cultural homogeneity in the Saudi culture. The frame of illegitimacy as immoral in the Saudi culture is juxtaposed with the idea of adultery

being normal in the American culture. Thus cultural standards are discursively constructed in opposition to one another.

SCLB were also urged to “let it go”, suggesting that they let go of their search. The rationale is that their fathers are accountable for abandonment and, hence, undeserving of their attention. Pressures to “let it go” also stemmed from concerns to protect SCLB from exposure to oppressions within Saudi culture. These generalized perspectives on Saudis and Saudi Arabia emphasize reductionist orientalist understandings of Eastern cultures as barbaric, ahistorical, uncivilized and oppositional to the West. At face value comments such as “let it go” appear to advocate for and seem supportive of the SCLB individual. But the rhetoric of “illegitimacy” and “let it go” work jointly to bracket SCLB voice from the discussion by delegitimizing their identities and undermining the importance of their search. Therefore, SCLB become constituted as trouble-makers, and their illegitimate status and desire to connect with their fathers are portrayed as senseless and disruptive. The social and cultural logic of what may be deemed legitimate and acceptable constructs their identities as hybrid and troublesome, capable of rupturing the norms.

SCLB negotiate the identity inherited from their fathers in a complex manner, and understand this identity as different in contrast to the family and culture in which they were raised. Even in their absence, the fathers have still held a significant role in shaping these individual’s identities and lives. The absences of their fathers are compensated with the presence of phenotypic traits, photographs, small possessions that once belonged to their fathers, and narratives about their fathers learned from their mothers and maternal families. SCLB strive to make sense of the “difference” and their imagined connection to Arab heritage and their fathers. Their “difference” often gets interpreted as a “deficiency” as their ethnic identity remains

unknown, waiting to be endorsed by the culture of their fathers. Thus their discourses aim to offer a sense of stability to their identity by obtaining cultural knowledge and a sustained line of communication with their fathers.

This study recognizes how social identities, such as ethnic identity, seen as partial, become more salient for multiracial individuals. They seek to substantiate their partial selves through more imaginings and further accentuate their ethnic identity.

This study implies that identities are not merely given to us as receivers, but they are demanded to be ascribed, and most importantly, sought with agency. SCLB enacts this agency as they search to “re-authorize” their family narratives about their fathers. Building upon the family narratives of their father allows them to exert control over their imagined relationship with their father and imagined connection to Arab ethnicity. It affords them the possibility to cultivate and extend their identities to accommodate their paternal heritage. It may also be inferred that this discursive process constitutes a form of resistance against discourses that seek to constrain identities into existing customary arrangements or exclude them all together.

This study reveals that hybrid identities marked by difference and with experience of father absence perhaps demonstrate a greater understanding of and empathy for accommodating cultural difference. SCLB leave behind years of anger and “letting go” of their relationship with their fathers, and yet seek to re-establish communication to negotiate the terms of their relationships with their fathers. Some SCLB who succeed in finding their fathers share cautionary tales for current seekers stating the outcome as bittersweet, and that their fathers are “worse than imagined”. Despite unsuccessful encounters with their fathers, they reflect on their experiences. Here are a few statements: “I don’t know what to do”, “I don’t know which was the better path for me”, and “Prepare for the worst and hope for the best”. These statements suggest

that some SCLB ponder if life will be one of mistrust and insecurity on reunion with their fathers. They often express fear of being “left to hang dry” yet again. Within these cautionary tales, they reveal a sense of concern for and sensitivity toward other SCLB making room for solidarity and camaraderie on the online space. Their cautionary tales are not shared to prevent other seekers from their search, but rather to prepare SCLB of the different possibilities. They share their experiences of how their identities may have become constrained and inhibited socially and on the site. However, they do not seek to inhibit the agency of their fellow SCLB, but rather enable them. They support current seekers to find answers at their own discretion and empower them with more information.

My analysis brings forth how construction of identity by multiethnic individuals is one of negotiating the shifting, and often, conflicting representations, and shoals of history. The blog highlights how normative assumptions of culture and ethnicity remain mutually exclusive, and how various truths remain in production. Multiethnic and multicultural individuals’ identity negotiations become a source of tension. They demonstrate ambivalence, even apathy, not only because of an internalized “identity crisis” from within, but also because their socialization renders a component of their identity problematic. Their ethnic identity does not fit into normative expectations, what Homi Bhabha describes as excess. This view brings a focus onto power structures that produce difference and onto hybrid experience as “the same but not quite”. For multiculturalism to be a progressive reality, we should not only see it from the vantage point of one’s marginalized status/traditions and where they come from, but we should also understand the context of the dominant culture our identities inhabit and the ways we become “socially seen and categorically reduced”. The dominant culture and structure that we inhabit lead us to interpret differences and inform the experiences and negotiations that follow. This means making



a commitment to recognize hybrid identities requires not merely understanding hybridity as a fusion of cultures or mixture of races but recognizing it as a production of history and hegemonies (Kraidy, 2002).

We must make sense of culture as fluid and subjective, and emancipate ourselves from binding understandings of cultural purity. By no means do I believe surrendering biological arguments or claims to authentic ethnicity means SCLB should abandon their search for their fathers or their desire to know more of Saudi heritage. Rather, we must question to what degree does the way we become socialized to think of race, ethnicity, even morality, constrain how we come to be identified, and what do these formations say about the societies we inhabit?

It is clear that Saudi heritage becomes a problematized identity on the SCLB blog. More investigation is required to discover the extent to which these searches for identity are motivated by a desire to rupture prevailing stereotypes of Saudis and Arabs in the U.S as barbaric and ahistorical, even terrorists. Also, to what extent do these representations burden and impact the lives and negotiations of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers, and to what extent is their search informed by these negotiations? To what degree do individuals negotiate their multiethnic heritage in their lived experience outside the SCLB blog?

### **Future Directions**

My analysis provides an entry point into the complexities of transnational abandonment and opens up a number of questions for future research to enhance the inquiry. My data sample of six posts and comment threads analyzed were only a portion of what is available on the site. Additionally, the blog has not been updated by the site administrator since late 2013, and multiple people who traffic through the site have commented to inquire how to get their story published. It is only recently, January of 2015, that a new administrator has taken control of the

blog and posted a new story. My study only provides a glimpse into this issue. The heavy presence of individuals inquiring for their stories to be published suggests that an issue such as transnational abandonment is a motif of a greater magnitude than what the blog alone leads one to believe.

Those soliciting information on the blog are English speaking mothers and children. Some commenters only respond in Arabic language and efforts are made by bilingual commenters to translate these readings. My limited and beginner's knowledge of Arabic language required me to omit Arabic language comments in my data sample. Taking Arabic written comments into account could enrich results for this study.

While many postings on the blog resonate with my own experience, some do not. For instance, the theme of illegitimacy, and condemning the parents of SCLB for having a child out of wedlock is not the same case as that of my parents. My parents, although married young, were married years before I was born. My father guarded their matrimony from his own parents with secrecy. To my understanding, only a select few of my father's brothers knew of their matrimony. My own experience suggests we must rethink how a theme such as illegitimacy may play out within marital relationships.

I did not come across the SCLB blog until after my father extended contact to me. I would not describe our relationship as idyllic. However, from my communications with him I have established contact with other family members, developing friendships, even having the opportunity to meet a cousin of mine. There are times I want to return to my life before I had contact with my father and cut off all communications, shutting the door because the emotions weigh heavy on me. Other times I want to remain open and hopeful and remind myself that I have chosen to forgive so that I may move forward with my life and allow for these relationships

I've once longed for to remain in my life. Having these connections stimulating a deeper interest for me to learn more about Saudi culture, it has also allowed me to see my own American culture and Cuban-American heritage in more clarity. My own story of negotiating ethnicity in the United States with father absence and with communication being established with paternal family members will provide a different vantage point from what has been presented in this study—it offers a perspective of what happens and changes after contact is established. As we understand from the cautionary tales provided by individuals who have found their fathers, perspectives alter upon reunion and this is worth further investigation.

The SCLB blog includes voices of individuals abandoned by their Saudi fathers and it is presented for public discussion, even dispute, by third party commenters on the site. Although the blog presents itself and has a mission statement that focuses on commonality and support, it cannot always comply with its mission. SCLB identities are put on public display, become a spectacle, and are subjected to harsh public opinion. In many ways it constrains freedom of expression for SCLB individuals to fully express their rationale to search for their fathers or even their own experiences. Opening up my research questions to a different methodology such as interviews with people who identify as abandoned by their Saudi fathers, will add to the findings of this study by allowing SCLB to speak with more authority without any concern of being criticized.

My research is an ongoing journey. To take this study forward, I have begun interviews with individuals who identify as being abandoned by their Saudi fathers. These interviews give further detail into how they identify with as well as negotiate Saudi heritage from their own lived experiences in the United States. Since I did not find adequate discussion on negotiating Saudi identity within the United States, I hope these interviews provide further understanding of how

SCLB negotiate their identities offline and to what extent the online discussions influence their lived experiences. As we see members dealing with largely imagined identities, I hope to extend this research by further exploring how the shameful portrayals or orientalist productions bear upon SCLB. I believe that findings of this research are a stepping-stone to a larger study on identity negotiation in the realm of transnational adoption. Opening this study up to triangulation of qualitative methods including autoethnography and interviews will allow for a deeper understanding of the complexities of transnational abandonment.

My research process has been an emotional journey for me. It has evoked memories and reminded me of my incompleteness and my wholeness. I conclude with the thoughts that flooded my mind through the research process in the final epilogue section. These memories and experiences must have been immensely meaningful to my struggle. Perhaps that is why they keep filling up my mind. I do not try to rationalize or analyze. But I document them as randomly as they appear. They will probably make sense to me at some point. Or they won't. I am in no rush to seek closure. I strive to understand my identity and heal at the moment, and give back, even if minimally, to the SCLB community through my academic projects.

## EPILOGUE

### Memory

It is March 2013 and I have been accepted by the graduate school at Washington State University, and they have given me a stipend to travel to the school. My first cousin's maternal aunt from Saudi Arabia is residing in Pullman, WA studying English in the US. She has invited my mother and me over for dinner the two nights we were supposed to be in town. The first night we eat with her and her father. Nimmah serves us Kahwa, a blend of Saudi coffee with spices. My mom whispers in my ear, "This tastes like tea". Till this day she insists it tastes like tea. Nimmah shares with us her goals of becoming a teen counselor and opening her own practice back home. We have a few cups, and they have prepared a spread of desserts and finger foods while we wait.

Despite the language barrier, her father teaches me to cook Kabsa, a traditional meat and rice dish. He shows me each spice he adds to the pot. For each one of them he asks, "What is this called?" I teach him the English names for the spices. "Cumin...that one, Coriander...". Over dinner, we laugh, share stories about family—I feel at home. As my mother and I eat, our plates never become empty. At the center of the table is an enormous dish filled with Kabsa, enough for a party of ten and a solid week of leftovers. As my mom and I eat, Nimmah and her father take a ladle and replenish our plate with more food. I laugh, impressed and delighted with the hospitality. Nimmah's father shows me photos of his only grandchild, my cousin, Adel. He is elated and shares a video of Adel's first sacrifice for Eid.

They are an introduction and connection to paternal family—Nimmah and her father have been the first connection to my father that I get to see in the flesh.

It is day two and Nimmah invites her friends over to introduce me to them and another traditional dinner of Magluba (a type of pasta vegetable stew). The women ask me if it is okay to speak in Arabic. I, thinking they probably want to feel comfortable, as they are in America and are immersed in English most of their time, answer, “Ok”. Suddenly, the Arabic language wraps around me like tidal waves, enveloping around me. Multiple conversations with multiple women, I become disoriented. My nascent knowledge of formal Arabic cannot grasp their wide vocabulary and quick chatter. The sounds are not foreign any longer, but the words are. I am welcomed into this space where many women are not in the slightest reserved so much like I am with my friends, but I become almost paralyzed and too shy. I am welcomed in this space, because of our relation, because I look like them. Nimmah says “You look just like your aunt Muneera.” I am reminded of what a struggle it is to negotiate and rectify relationships with relatives after abandonment. I wonder at the moment if my discomfort is from cultural difference, or due to the grief and pain of abandonment by my father. In this room of happy, warm faces, people are trying to share with me their culture, and recipes. But in a room so full, I suddenly feel very alone. Intimidated by the restless waves of language, I step outside of the apartment to find my mother on her cell phone. I am so glad to have this experience with her and so happy she is with me. I started to think and value the sacrifices my Mom made and the ways she made her presence known in my life. How much our family and we have been through and persevered together! I hug her tightly, and cry briefly before returning inside to the party.

There is no script to follow for communication with an absent father, nonetheless, countless family members are inherited literally overnight. I've learned in this moment, so much more about myself, than I had expected.

### **Possession**

Communicating with my father, Saudi relatives, friends and “things” over Skype is like looking through a window at best and looking through prison glass at worst.

Sometimes, when I place down the phone or close my computer, I feel like shutting the door on all communication, indefinitely. I wonder what they really think. Shutting off and tuning out didn't only happen after I started communicating with my paternal family, but also far before. Once, it was the way I communicated with items of my father's I inherited.

Once upon a time, the only object I had of my father's was a rug I received from family friends when I was sixteen. The rug depicted three major Islamic holy mosques, Makkah, Medina and Al-Aqsa. Growing up and bitter about his absence, I once thought about selling it, but kept it hidden and folded in a closet. Before reconnecting with him, I decided to take it out and display it. It was pretty after all. Since then, after digging in the attic and closets, I've come across more and more things. A saber with Arabic inscriptions, a clock with Arabic numerals, a couple of decorative dallah's (coffee pots) inscribed with the Saudi crest. I do not know the significance of these things, but they represent some kind of thread, some kind of history, and they have become my things. These items are a reflection of my heritage, they represent my own thoughts towards fatherlessness. I embrace the objects and allow a lot of these things to be visible in my room. Sometimes we try to keep our pain hidden and beneath the surface. For me, allowing these things to breathe and be visible has allowed healing. A wound needs air to heal.

## Serendipity

Throughout my communication with paternal family, I've always been uncertain of how genuine they were. I've also worried that I may never have the opportunity to meet any blood relative. For the past year I've had a cousin from Saudi Arabia living in North Carolina with her husband for school. Enduring the busy life associated with being a college student we do not get to see each other.

It is Summer 2014 and I am in Edgewater, NJ, overlooking the Hudson river from my best friend's apartment. Throughout my trip, I've posted pictures of the cityscape on the Instagram app. It is the evening before my trip home and as I pack, my cousin contacts me through every medium possible, an email, Instagram message, a text message.

“Are you in New York?!”

“Yes” I say, and surprise to me, so is she.

My flight leaves in the morning. After some schmoozing with the flight agent and a hundred dollars later, I extend my travel by another day.

We make plans to meet in Bryant Park. I arrive early. Two hours early. As I anxiously wait, my nervous bladder fills and I make frequent stops in the restroom. Bryant Park is overflowing with people and I find a place to stand and collect myself and my nerves. An elderly woman with broken English approaches me and takes my hand. She slides a beaded bracelet on my wrist. “Peace, peace,” she says. I reply, “Thank you.” She gives me a holographic amulet that says “Work Smoothly, Lifetime Peace”. At the moment, I am desperate for peace. She dives into her purse and brings out a receipt book “Donation? Donation?” I wonder if this is one of the infamous New York scams I've been warned about. But I am in no condition to reject any offering of peace and offer her a five dollar bill.



Emptying my bladder, for the third time, I get a message from my cousin. “Where are you? We’re here by the ice cream stand”.

Finding my way to the ice cream hut amidst the crowds, I recognize her immediately. I can remember myself approaching her direction, closing in on her face like a smooth, stabilized pan of a camera in movies. I feel comfortable in her presence. I’m anxious, and yet at ease. She looks different to me than the pictures I’ve seen. Yet she is strangely familiar. A familiar stranger. This is the first time we’ve met.

Hugs are funny little expressions. Some are apprehensive to hugs. Some hugs are quick, and loosely held. Some are a pat on the back with an air kiss on the cheek, some are strong and warm with a real kiss on the cheek—my abuela’s hug. Others seem like a strong handshake. I’ve always been fascinated by hugs. They require a certain amount of comfort and risk. A hug means we open ourselves, and our body in embrace.

I see my cousin and I want desperately to squeeze her and hold tightly, but we are strangers. I do not know if she’ll be comfortable with that. I transcend my thoughts to give her the hug and meet her with the hug I’ve been taught by my abuela. I love it as I embrace her in a strong hug. I thought how I loathed it as the shy, timid, little girl at large family gatherings.

I’ve been taught to hug the Saudi way on different occasions. The rhythm is slightly different. There is a combination of handshake, maybe three, a hug and kisses, alternating each side---a kiss on both cheeks. This happens in an order I don’t quite recall. Amani taught me first, Nimmah taught me second. As I embrace her in my abuela’s style, she greets me the Saudi way with alternating rhythms and with handshake and kisses. This makes for an awkward dance and we collide and shift around quickly to embrace each other.

I reach out to touch her on the arm and apologize, “I have to know you’re real.” I touch her thick loosely coiled hair, “We have the same hair!”

Suddenly, everything feels more human, less threatening. In our hug we were people with beating hearts, and cultural difference, if any, diffused in our hug.

Her husband motions us to take a picture. We pose, look at the result and both request for another. The first picture is never good, but to be honest, I don’t care how I look today. This photo is a memory in making.

I want to give her something, but have not come prepared. On my wrist I have a wood burned bangle with the word “imagine” written on it. The funny thing is, this experience for me is beyond even my own imagination. I ask her if she likes it. I say “It’s yours”.

Over lunch I share with her photos of my family and ask her who I look more like. Her husband, acting as translator, says “both”. Then he adds, “You have uncle Khalid’s eyes.” Our encounter was awkward, uncertain, like one would expect with a familiar stranger. We talk a little about their drive to New York. I expected to have so many questions, but at the moment they fade out.

After spending time shopping and sightseeing, we arrive back to Bryant park and hug each other once more, more graceful in this attempt.

“I think we will go to Florida”

I am hopeful we will see one another again.

Together. Since meeting my cousin, I have felt oddly more at ease reflecting on abandonment and new relationships with family. Meeting her made this experience all more human for me.

**Gift**

My adolescent cousin Reema loves to talk. Over the first year we knew each other, she would call me at any hour of the day, everyday. I do my best to remind her of our eight-hour time difference, but it doesn't make any difference. She and her older brother Mo love to Skype and chat about world events, history, movies and fashion. They both have served as my excellent Arabic tutors. Reema prides herself on her expertise and often corrects my pronunciation, "Can you make the *Hhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* sound? No... Try again, *Hhhhhhhhhhhhh*".

Reema calls me on Facetime, "Where are you now?" she asks. "Going for a walk in my neighborhood," I respond.

She introduces me to her friend and asks me about school. I ask her about her mom and brother.

"Can you say something in Arabic?"

"I'm sorry Reema, I haven't studied in a long time"

"I don't care, say something"

"Can I tell you the city I'm from?" She nods, "Okay, Ana min medinat Tampa"

"What? I can't hear you"

She giggles and I repeat the phrase thrice. "Ana min medinat Tampa"

"What? I still can't hear you"

Then she says to me "Assalamu Alaykum" (Peace be upon you.)

And I responded "Wa Alaykum Assalam" (And upon you be peace.)

"Okay I have to go."

I tell her to have fun at her sleepover and she says again, "Assalamu Alaykum"

I respond, "Wa Alaykum Assalam". She smiles.

She always corrects me. This time she does not. What a gift she has given me in these repeated acts.

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**APPENDIX A: Open, Axial and Selective Codes**

Open Codes	Broader categories at axial coding stage	Themes at selecting coding stage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Day of Judgment</li> <li>• Status</li> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Sin</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Family Honor</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Parenting</li> <li>• Judge</li> <li>• Good People </li> <li>• Prevention (Anti-intercultural marriage)</li> <li>• God’s Eyes</li> <li>• Islamic Rules</li> <li>• Zina</li> <li>• Mother</li> <li>• Illegitimate</li> <li>• Punishment</li> <li>• Inheritance</li> <li>• Adultery</li> <li>• Mistake</li> <li>• Young</li> <li>• Cultural Difference</li> <li>• Private v. Public Discourse</li> <li>• Arranged Marriage</li> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• Sin Incarnate</li> <li>• Sin</li> <li>• Not Married</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Consequence</li> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• WARNING</li> <li>• Travel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegitimize</li> <li>• Undermine</li> <li>• Discontinue</li> <li>• Drop the search</li> <li>• Undeserving</li> <li>• Inappropriate</li> <li>• Socially unacceptable</li> <li>• Blame</li> <li>• Tarnishing honor</li> </ul>	<p>(Il)legitimacy and letting it go</p>

**APPENDIX A: Open, Axial and Selective Codes**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male Dominated Society</li> <li>• Arab Marriage</li> <li>• Arab Control</li> <li>• Muslim “face”</li> <li>• Generalization</li> <li>• Good Muslim</li> <li>• Bad Muslim</li> <li>• Saudi Man: Wrong; Stubborn</li> <li>• Cultural Difference</li> <li>• Human Rights Violation</li> <li>• Better Off</li> <li>• Ethnocentrism</li> <li>• Free</li> <li>• Danger</li> <li>• Wasting Time</li> <li>• Protection</li> <li>• Abortion</li> <li>• He Contact You</li> <li>• Deserting</li> <li>• Move on</li> <li>• Owes Life</li> <li>• Never Let Go</li> <li>• Forgiveness</li> <li>• Too Late</li> <li>• Autonomous Decision</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sight perception</li> <li>• Variance</li> <li>• Dissimilarity</li> <li>• Features</li> <li>• Hybrid Ethnicity</li> <li>• Nature v. Nurture</li> <li>• Ethnic identity</li> <li>• Race</li> <li>• Relate</li> <li>• Arab</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marked by ethnic difference</li> <li>• Other</li> <li>• Personality characteristics</li> <li>• Resemblance with father</li> <li>• Filling up the gap</li> <li>• Salience</li> <li>• Blood relation</li> </ul>	<p>Presence, absence and difference</p>

**APPENDIX A: Open, Axial and Selective Codes**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essentialism</li> <li>• Islam</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Blood</li> <li>• Arab-American</li> <li>• Good looks</li> <li>• Silver Lining</li> <li>• Looks like father</li> <li>• Looks</li> <li>• Saudi Ancestry</li> <li>• Natural</li> <li>• Honorable</li> <li>• Naturally relate</li> <li>• Hybrid</li> <li>• Irish in You</li> <li>• Saudi in You</li> <li>• Claiming</li> <li>• Like Father</li> <li>• Arabs Recognize</li> <li>• Muslim Identity</li> <li>• Touch</li> <li>• Void</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Natural</li> <li>• Honorable</li> <li>• Clues</li> <li>• Desperate</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Desire</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Questions</li> <li>• Need</li> <li>• Want</li> <li>• Children</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Heritage</li> <li>• Ancestry</li> <li>• Aware of Existence/Not Sure</li> <li>• Not seriously</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of cultural knowledge</li> <li>• Patriarchy</li> <li>• Father vs. mother</li> </ul>	
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**APPENDIX A: Open, Axial and Selective Codes**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sorry</li> <li>• Never Met</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Fascination with Middle East</li> <li>• Middle Eastern, Art, Culture and Custom</li> <li>• Collecting</li> <li>• Gift from Father</li> <li>• Presence in company of absence</li> <li>• Medical History</li> <li>• “Happy with at least”</li> <li>• “Where I come from”</li> <li>• “Identity Crisis”</li> <li>• Desire</li> <li>• Lost</li> <li>• Know more</li> <li>• Missing</li> <li>• “All I know”</li> <li>• Fill a void</li> <li>• Space can’t fill</li> <li>• Emotionally hurt</li> <li>• Wonder</li> <li>• Search</li> <li>• Collectivity</li> <li>• Westerner</li> <li>• Poor Kid</li> <li>• Smart</li> <li>• Pity</li> <li>• Beautiful</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Smart; Driven</li> <li>• Success</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Brave</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of</li> </ul>	<p>Negotiating relations and</p>

**APPENDIX A: Open, Axial and Selective Codes**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural</li> <li>• Honorable</li> <li>• Relationship</li> <li>• Never Let Go</li> <li>• Choice</li> <li>• Right</li> <li>• Will</li> <li>• Right to know</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Don't give up</li> <li>• Peace</li> <li>• Seeking Help</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Owed Nothing</li> <li>• "Worse than I imagined"</li> <li>• Prepare for Worst</li> <li>• Hope for Best</li> <li>• Fake</li> <li>• Catfish (online identity deception)</li> <li>• Deception</li> <li>• Dead Beat Dad</li> <li>• Rejection</li> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• Fascination</li> <li>• "Happy with at Least"</li> <li>• Relationship</li> <li>• Facebook</li> <li>• Rejection</li> <li>• Nervous Breakdown</li> <li>• Alone</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Patience</li> <li>• Future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>possibilities</li> <li>• Risk Taking</li> <li>• Enabling agency</li> <li>• Providing Information</li> <li>• Consequences</li> <li>• Resistance</li> <li>• Camaraderie</li> <li>• Support</li> </ul>	<p>weighing the outcomes</p>
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