

Digital Liminality and Cross-Cultural Re-integration in the Middle East

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Introduction

The phenomenon of using digital devices to “move between worlds” is not limited to one region, or age group. Therefore this essay about the *digital liminality* of Middle Eastern students should resonate in several fields, including cultural studies and ethnography. The project grew out of a year in Riyadh, during which I undertook ethnographic research with Islamic students who faced difficult challenges as they moved from their *in-between-ness* as university students—during which they roamed widely through both digital and geographical travel—to the process of re-integrating back into their highly conservative home societies.

The number of Muslim students now enrolled in Europe and the U.S., or the number of instructors of English who are employed in the Islamic world, would be difficult to quantify. Saudi Arabia alone sent 66,000 students to U.S. universities in 2011, making it “the fastest-growing source of foreign students in the U.S., ahead of China” (Knickmeyer 2012). Having witnessed the intensive recruitment of English language instructors while in the Gulf States region, I believe that theorizing this site of intercultural exchange is overdue.

While teaching in Riyadh from 2013-2014, I saw that Saudi students were achieving separation and liminality¹ through digital technology in ways that were unimaginable for prior generations. They were forming new identities and accessing information that could not be

admitted when they were later “re-integrated” into a social order that confines its subjects in within rigid standards of appearance and behaviour, and places “severe restrictions of freedom of expression” (Al-Rasheed 2014: 353). I wanted to hear what students had to say about their liminality, or in-between-ness—living between the world of Western freedoms and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s world of *submission*, where most of them would be working, and raising families. My goal was to give students a framework to understand their role as “threshold people” people on the verge of a new way of life, and to help them analyse the challenges of re-incorporation in a Saudi context.

When I began implementing a restructured Freshman English curriculum at Al Faisal University in 2013-2014, I built on an understanding reached with students. When I framed the university experience as a rite of passage in the Fall of 2013 (Stephens 2014; 2015), students immediately grasped that in their digitally-mediated rite of passage, *both they and their society will have to change*.

Although many of this generation express in digital form their desire for “some form of change,” these youths “still remain socially conservative” (Ali Sallam and Hunter, 2013: 145). Yet they also have an appetite for on-line entertainment, and a general willingness to “do as the Romans do,” when abroad. Based on interactions with over 200 Saudi students, I would describe them as moving through a unique liminal phase, because of their acute connectedness to the “outside world.” This is not like the Amish Rumspringa, where after sowing some wild oats, most Amish youth return to the fold, having left behind their period of experimentation.² Many of my Saudi students come from wealthy families, and have travelled widely in Europe and the U.S. Not a few have attended U.S. universities. Saudi youths may be “completely different”

when they are in the West, but no one imagines that they will leave their cells behind, or abandon what they have learned through their virtual and physical travels. I ask my students: are you going to give up all you have learned about technology, the lifestyles of other cultures, etc.? They say, of course not. Then I ask: will Saudi society be able to accept all of your changes? They are just as definitive: *no*. Clearly, in this re-integration process, *something has to give*.

It is the difficult re-integration of *linked* Saudi students into a conservative “religious nationalism” (Al-Rasheed, 2013) that I encouraged students to explore. Their digital liminality journals were a *researched extension of their auto-ethnography* (Stephens 2014). Through readings, discussions, and journals, I aimed to help students *defamiliarize* their relationship with their cells. I want them to analyze the implications of the world they are linked to through their cells, and the challenges of an attempted re-integration which is in their immediate futures.

1). A Brief Review of Rites of Passage

Rites of Passage are cultural rituals that guide a transition from one stage of life to another. The three-part typology for rites of passage was proposed by Arthur Van Gennep in *Rites de Passage* (1908) and later developed and popularized by British anthropologist Victor Turner (1967).

- 1) Separation—“cutting away” from the former self;
- 2) Transition—the *liminal* phase, re: “in-between-ness” (being between worlds);
- 3) Re-Integration—re-entering society with a new status.

Teaching this material to Saudi students, we reached an understanding that served as a building block: *Saudi society is marked by incomplete separation*. There is very little separation from family, even less so for females. The limited separation at the university is much less than what most students experience at an American university (living in a dorm, etc.) Still, the time in

the university setting may be the only “space of separation” that female students in particular are able to achieve. But they are achieving their separation through other means: by their immersion in digital technologies, social networks, American entertainment, etc.

In my second semester Freshman English course (Spring 2014), we focused on cross-cultural dynamics of *digitally mediated liminality*. With that in mind, let’s look more closely at the three phases of a rite of passage. These served as a theoretical frame for students’ “Digital Liminality Journals,” which I used as an ethnographic resource.

1). SEPARATION—This stage involves a metaphorical “death.” The initiate is forced to leave behind, or “cut off” previous practices—the ways of the child, or in a university context, the routines of adolescence/ high school. The first phase requires the child to go through a separation from his family; as childhood is left behind, this involves his/her “death” as a child.³ One sees some instances of an un-desired cut-off from family and community in the “Digital Journals.”

2). TRANSITION—*Liminal rites* involve “the creation of a *tabula rasa*, through the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits.”⁴ During transition away from childhood or adolescence, participants must pass a “test” to prove they are ready for adulthood. If they succeed, the re-integration stage celebrates the “new birth” of an adult who is welcomed back into society. As Joseph Campbell has remarked, “*All children need to be twice born*, to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind.”⁵ If such “new birth” rituals are missing, then young people often remain in an extended, often infantilized adolescence.

Freshman English is itself a rite, a “test” that must be passed in order to prove that students are ready for advanced classes that will move them towards an adult career. The “ways of the child,” such as the high school version of doing writing/ English, must be left behind.⁶

In liminal situations, participants are taken outside their normal environment. In traditional societies, this might be a camp. But universities serve a similar function. Participants are “brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain.” As a result, they often come to feel “dislocated and socially unstructured” (Thomassen 2006: 322).⁷ So liminal periods are *destructive* as well as *constructive*. After the pain of cutting off the old role or habits (destructive), comes creative rebirthing (constructive): scripting a new social role, which is performed for the community, or ritually celebrated/announced during the reintegration stage.

Students in Freshman English frequently experience a similar dislocation, or perceive the coursework as “acts of pain,” especially in ESL contexts—and even more in a culture of minimal literacy.⁸ By drawing parallels to the disorientation that is designed to accompany the separation phase of rites of passage, Instructors can “give meaning to their pain.” If students know more about where that pain is leading (having to read, think critically, and write in a second language), then the disorientation and stress that often accompanies being a first-year student will be more bearable. It may even be ennobled. I explore this dynamic in the “quest for freedom” themes of first-semester English, such Frederick Douglass’s quote: “without struggle there is no progress.”

Elaboration on Liminality

Liminality comes from the Latin *līmen*, which means “a threshold.” During the liminal stage of a rite of passage, participants “stand at the threshold” between their previous way of structuring their identity or community, and a new way, structured by the ritual.

Cell phones, and other digital technologies, themselves function as a sort of threshold. In their “Digital Liminality Journals,” students examined to what extent digital technologies are a gateway to cultures they would not be able to access, within their traditional host culture.

Cultures can also “stand at the threshold.” Societies can pass through “an in-between period between two structured world-views.” This *social liminality* has been characterized as “*an age of creativity where ‘man asked radical questions’*, and where the ‘unquestioned grasp on life is loosened’.”⁹ Social revolutions are a type of political-cultural liminality, since they can lead either to a collapse of the status quo—such as the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (Cole 2014; Owen 2014), or to significant social change (as in the U.S. Civil Rights revolution).

A “permanent liminality” can exist, as when a liminal state becomes “fixed.” Sociologist Arpad Szakolczai includes in this category *monasticism* (monks or nuns perpetually prepare and reinforce separation), and *court society*, “with individuals continuously performing their roles in an endless ceremonial game,” re: the liminal stage.¹⁰ The latter has relevance for the rentier monarchies in the Gulf States (Hertog 2010; Dawisha 2013).

During political and cultural liminal periods,¹¹ social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved. Continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt.¹² The dissolution of order during liminality creates a fluid situation, a flux in which new institutions and customs can become established.¹³ This broader framework has limited applicability to KSA, but cells/digital technologies do provide a window on such phenomenon. One example is the various digital technologies and social networks that went into the making, production, promotion, and distribution of the Oscar-nominated film *The Square*, about the uprising in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.¹⁴

Let us return to student rites of passage, and the networks in which they are embedded.¹⁵ C.G. Jung and his followers have seen the individuation process as taking place in a liminal space. “Individuation begins with a withdrawal from normal modes of socialization, epitomized by the breakdown of the persona [during] liminality.”¹⁶ So whether social or psychological, withdrawal, and the dissolution of the old order/identity, is a prequel to a new script.

Just as university life (usually) ends with graduation, all forms of liminality eventually must dissolve. Usually the individual returns to a social structure—with both individual and structure transformed. But if that structure cannot integrate the transformed individuals, then these “non-normative” individuals with their non-assimilated liminality may develop their own more or less autonomous social structure.¹⁷ This suggests a question I cannot pursue here: What sorts of structures, if any, can stabilize the new modes of radically liminal Saudi students?

3). RE-INTEGRATION—During the final stage of a rite of passage, the participant is re-incorporated into society with a new identity, as a “new” being. This is the process that students were asked to imagine/ investigate, whether through readings on the impacts of social media, or the challenges of their professions in cross-cultural contexts.

Initiates come out of rite of passage experiences with a new and empowering story. They write a new script, which not only articulates a new identity, but connects them to their community. Both the community and the initiate benefit from a rite of passage. An intentional rite of passage experience provides the space for the community to transmit its core values and confer the role or responsibilities appropriate to the initiate’s stage of life, thus insuring cultural continuity—a sort of knitting together of the generations.

As students did research, we also discussed another dimension of the rite of passage process, as it relates to their university career, and their investment in digital technologies. This has to do with a sort of metanarrative about various stages of life as “moving between confinements”. The confinements may become bigger, but they are always there. Digital technologies give the illusion of complete freedom, but of course in practice they structure new forms of confinement. What sort of confinements do digital technologies constitute for students?

2). Moving Between Confinements

Rites of passage are a ritual means to move people between different types of confinement. They facilitate the breaking of old confinements: strict limitations placed on the movement and behaviour of children are sundered. In the romantic imagination, rites of passage are identified with the liminal phase, a socially sanctioned in-betweenness in which all prior confinements are ruptured. During liminality, possibilities seem unlimited, and identity is in flux (Stephens 2009).

Yet the use of the term *threshold* to describe liminality indicates that adolescents are on the verge of adulthood. Their temporary freedoms are only a means of breaking old habits, and preparing them to accept the responsibilities (and hence the confinements) of adulthood. There will always be another confinement, although the new confinement may give us more space to roam—or may provide the illusion of more freedom.

Picturing the different types of confinements that humans experience during the life cycle, we see a trend from small confinements, to gradually larger confinements. A baby has a crib, or is wrapped in swaddling clothes. A pre-toddler gets a playpen. The toddler faces barriers to prevent access to some rooms, or stairs. The child is confined to a yard, and then, as a student, to a classroom, or a playground. The playgrounds get bigger for the preteen, through sports, etc.

When a teen or young adult moves into the workplace, the office cubicle may be quite small, although the salary enables one to move out of prior confinements. Marriage introduces a new set of confinements. Eventually, after retirement, humans will gain new freedoms, yet also face a series of tighter confinements, which may or may not include a retirement home.

Every phase of life requires its own set of confinements, which are of course culturally specific. For example, in a Saudi context, many Westerners choose to live in compounds. These allow for some freedoms of dress, of movement, and lifestyle choices that would not be possible outside the compound. But the compound is also, of course, a confinement which almost assures that there will be little or no interaction with local culture.

After discussing cultural specific life stage confinements, I asked students to reflect on desired and undesired elements of their confinements. To what degree are they able to escape undesired confinements through digital technologies? Some of their responses will follow.

3). Self-Voice of Saudi Students: Digital Liminality Journals

The Theory

Barnawi (2011) has argued for the utility of “self-voice” (personal narratives) for ESL students in general, and Saudi students in particular. I agree, yet in guiding students towards the construction of a narrative with thematic unity, I see that the digital technologies in which they are so invested tend to create, and replicate, a splintered sense of self. That self may have cohesion within the network of a particular social media, but it does not usually translate well beyond the medium. Creating a more unified sense of self that can be narrated to an audience outside one’s own bubble is a primary challenge of Freshman English, in my view.

Knowing how to tell a story should be a building block of the university experience, which inevitably shapes character. Hanson (2013) suggests: “*To understand the change that students undergo, we need to solicit stories from them.*” This is an eminently practical skill. Job interviews, after all, “are exercises in storytelling” (Hanson 2013).

I “solicited stories” from students about their digital liminality, but found that their self-voice was fragmented. MIT Professor Sherry Turkle’s work on the evolving relationship of humans to digital technologies has been a useful guide. Turkle has moved from a largely utopian outlook in *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984), to a more dystopian view in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2012).

Once people become accustomed to communicating through multiple windows, or apps, then they develop “a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time,” Turkle has noted (1997, 1101). This self-distribution has had some liberatory elements, such as the exploration of gender roles. But the less-desirable consequences of our horizontal “distribution” have been well-documented. In an oft-cited article with the provocative title “Is Google Making us Stupid?” Nicholas Carr confessed that he had gotten the sense that “someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do” (Carr 2008).

Carr argued for the necessity of a “deep thinking” which digital media often seem to disable: “In the *quiet spaces* opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book,” writes Carr, “we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas.” It is not that we have been made “stupid,” but that we need to reserve time for “deep reading”—for the “meditative benefits,” one might say, of leisurely strolls through longer texts.¹⁸

Michael Suman at the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future reports that his students have ever more trouble focusing on lectures and reading. Their messages to him are often gibberish, and they ask the same questions over and over. Even when they have turned off their digital media, they frequently cannot think through concepts and ideas. "They're increasingly challenged to engage in deep and meaningful thought," Suman says. "Sequential, logical, rational thinking seems to be severely compromised" (Greengard 2011: 17-18).

The Reality: Girls Just Want to Watch Vines

Reading my student Nada's journals, I would not say that her ability to tell a story had been compromised, but that rather, that she exhibited a sort of *vine sensibility*. Nada's account of her family's spring break in Malaysia is at once a teen diary of a digital addiction, and a Saudi variant of "Lifestyles of the Rich and hyper-connected." Nada's mission was to stay linked by any means necessary. During a seven-hour layover in Abu Dhabi, Dad placated daughter's internet anxieties by settling in the VIP lounge.

I used their Internet for the whole 6 hours. I went through Path, kept myself updated with my followers and posted pictures of how bored we all were in the airport. Then I went through Vine, watched some of King Bach's vines. Then we got on board for the flight to Pinang. There was Wifi on the plane. But my father was asleep so sadly I had to just live with the movies on the plane. After we reached Pinang safely, the first thing I asked for when we got to the motel was the Wifi password. Then I kept watching the vines I missed out on from King Bach, and then I went to sleep.

Nada's digital investment is not really unusual for my students, but the extremes to which she took this on a family vacation were often comic (as are vines). When Nada's family decided to "stay in and swim the whole day at the resort," she experience it as a frustrating confinement.

...for me as an Internet addict, it was kind of hard to just ignore my phone and swim the entire day. I kept sending Snapchats to all my friends of how nice the weather is and how tan I looked. I kept updating my followers on Twitter and Path of what I do during my

day and if I had funny stories, like for example how my father pushed me into the pool because of how I made fun of his chewing when he eats. Then at around 8:00 pm we walked around the city for 2 hours. *I had no Internet for 2 hours and it was bad for me.*

Nada just wanted to be online. While her father was imploring her to come swim with the family, Nada had only one thing on her mind: “the new episode of the series I watch, *The Walking Dead*, came out and I was too excited to watch it.” Sometimes there are more important things than rest, relaxation, and quality family time at a high-priced resort in tropical Southeast Asia:

I did not know what to do so *I pretended to be sick just to watch the episode*. I went back to the room and got my laptop. I opened the Internet and searched for the episode. It opened and when I played the video, it began to lag and get slow with me. *I was freaking out. I took my laptop and went to the lobby*, hoping the Internet would be faster. Turns out that it just made everything worse, because *my father was there and he saw me. He got upset. So I had to stop using electronics that day as an apology.*

So Nada got grounded for a day. But “after a whole day of torment of not using the Internet” her story has a happy ending, waking up before dawn to reconnect with her “real family.”

Perhaps Nada is one of Suman’s students who are “challenged to engage in deep and meaningful thought.” Those who have read Nada’s account of vine-binging, and updates of how bored or tanned she is, will understand the challenge of taking some of the vine sensibility, and translating that into a thesis-guided narrative. (Yet far be it from me to denigrate the creativity that many vines manage to condense into six seconds). But “desperate times call for desperate measures.” If a student will go so far as to play sick in order to escape family fun, and stay in a dark motel room watching a post-apocalyptic TV horror drama, then you can imagine what they might do when left to their own devices in a classroom.

Some of my students wrote about the digital distractions that routinely go in classes.

Female students at Alfaisal must sit segregated in a balcony; furthermore they sit behind smoked glass. It is therefore almost impossible to monitor what female students do. One wrote:

The microeconomics class was boring so I and my friends were taking some funny pictures through snapchat. In our free time we watched a Youtube channel that criticized some Arabic series in a funny way. In the biology class I kept looking at the time through my cell phone waiting for 5 o'clock which is when my spring vacation starts.

I have rarely encountered the resistance some professors report when they limit student access to cells and computers in class (Young 2006). Most students bought into the idea of a “digital timeout” as a way to improve their grades, and to practice defamiliarization.

The following excerpts from students journals have three themes: a) efforts to withdraw from, or minimize, their digital addictions; b) portraits of family life, i.e., how Saudi families are being restructured, and in some cases reconstituted, through digital means; c) critical perspectives on the rupture that physical and digital travel are causing for some students.

A). Attempts to withdraw, with varying degrees of success

“Sarah” writes that she and “Noura” have “made a bargain to stay away from the following social networks for a month: Tumblr, Path (she uses that), Twitter (I use that). Our reason for doing this is that we feel that our thoughts are no longer our own. That we’ve become like parrots, only repeating things and talking about things we find in social networks. *Especially* Tumblr. We can spend hours on it.” The following excerpt, from Sarah’s first entry, expressed the sense that social media can lead to a sort of group-think:

I’ve been having this feeling recently.....like I’m sort of being dictated to think a certain way. I can no longer tell if I genuinely think like this or if it’s someone else’s thoughts I’ve memorized, like I subconsciously decided I agree with this very popular opinion.

Sarah's thoughts reinforce Turkle's findings (2012) about "teenagers whose identities are shaped not by self-exploration but by how they are perceived by the online collective." Some coaches have begun banning social media use by their players, even describing it as a "social poison." My own students estimated that they were on-line about 5-6 hours a day.¹⁹ While engaged in such saturation usage, it can become difficult for young people to individuate.

Sarah's journal entry also points to research by Gardner and Davis (2013), which suggests that social media and digital apps place identity formation within a static confinement. In an interview after the publication of *The App Generation*, Howard Gardner observes: "Kids feel pushed into developing a public identity early, and since it has been widely posted and effectively branded, it is actually difficult to explore other forms of identity."²⁰

Students are often challenged to achieve separation from an on-line identity in which they may feel trapped by the expectations created by the presentation of their on-line self (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2012). Another student, "Hussein," described himself as a recovering addict. He recounted how withdrawing from digital addictions opened space for exercise, and a passion for reading books. Hussein's "confinement" is closely related to the need to "keep up with" networks on various apps, which becomes an addictive impulse:

It's really hard to dispose of social media. It's not an addiction anymore, but I'm obligated to use the Internet. I receive important emails, and my university forces me to use digital media, so I can't get rid of it or else I am going to receive a bad grade. But I don't use facebook, twitter, instagram, kik, keek, kaak, and whatever you want to call them. I used to be a heavy user, but by avoiding these networks I noticed all the free time I had. I was very attached [so] that I felt my body was being neglected.

Hussein goes on to describe his effort, in 2013, to go one month without watching TV.

After "cheating" he decided to "change the rules":

I noticed how much time I had been wasting. I read books, went out with friends, cooked, exercised, and determined to learn the piano. My life became a stress free environment. Doing more actually made me happier. The trick to keep myself motivated was to make sure I wasn't sitting around doing nothing. Otherwise, bad habits will come back.

One particular bad habit, globally evident, was staring into cells while in the company of friends. Turkle has described a "special vulnerability" of young people today. Their relationship to digital technology is conflicted: by turns ecstatic, and ambiguous, or resentful. In her interviews, teenagers complain about growing up "tethered" by cellphones and being required to endlessly phone home. Yet they seem to replicate this tethering, often following a familial pattern:

Although always connected, they feel deprived of attention.....Some, as children, were pushed on swings while their parents spoke on cellphones. Now these same parents do their e-mail at the dinner table. (Young 2011)

Hussein's journal paints a similar scenario:

Wherever I go, people are very attached to their phones including me. But some people would panic if you placed them and their phones in separate rooms. I would be sitting with a friend, and the whole purpose of this outing is to catch up. Somehow he can't help himself but to hold it, as if he needs his dosage. I am sure he means no disrespect [but it is] a nasty habit that he can't seem to stop.....Being unavailable isn't accepted anymore.

Hussein also shares a perspective on the digital reconstitution of family, which will serve as a transition to the next section: "When I was in America, the easiest way to contact my family was through skype." Many of my students in Saudi Arabia either communicate with family members in the U.S. through digital means, or have lived in the U.S. and stayed in touch that way.

B). Portrait of Family Life

"Noura"—a student who wears a niqab—began with a detailed look at how intimate is her relationship to her cell, and how it mediates her relationship with family members:

I always keep my cell phone next when I go to sleep, I keep checking it whenever I wake up to see if I have any important messages, also to check the timeMy driver calls me to let me know that he's at the door to drive me to college. Before I go to university I take

my three years old sister to my grandmother's house. Instead of ringing the door bell and waking up everyone and standing in the front door until someone open it, I use my cell phone to call her to open the door for me.

Noura's journal uses the cell-free-zone of my English class as a reference point—a tether. But she always returns to family. Interestingly, that intimate family portrait gives constant evidence of how other cultures are “penetrating the veil”—in Noura's case, not just American culture, but an emerging fascination with the narratives of Turkish, Korean, and Japanese dramas:

After my English class I used my cell to set up the due date of this assignment. During a break I called my friends. They were studying for an Islamic exam except one of them was watching a Korean show on her laptop. She advised me to try watching Korean dramas....[Later] I called my driver to come [take me home]. *My father was still at work, my mother was watching a Turkish drama, my 16 year old brother was on his laptop playing an online game [and] my seven years old brother was playing play station three, and only my little sister was playing with her toys and not on devices.....* Before I went to sleep, I made sure to set up the alarm of my cell phone to not miss the prayer time.

Digital technologies constantly structure how Noura's family comes together, and plays together.

This sometimes produces some ironies:

Every Friday my aunts and their children gather in my grandmother's house. All of us were in the living room talking [and] of course all of us having our cell phones next to us we check in the silence moments. All of the children [play] with devices and after almost 3 hours of playing they leave their devices to charge and they play games like racing and hiding. *It is good that they aren't playing with devices but without them they make a lot of noises to the extent where you want them to go back playing with their devices.*

Whereas parents or babysitters used to park kids in front of the TV, increasingly nowadays their digital devices are the babysitters. As we become used to their total absorption into digital games, the normal sounds of kids playing can seem obtrusive.

Noura was the only female student I taught at Al Faisal who wore a niqab in the balcony. Most female students felt free to shed the niqab in that context: they were physically segregated from the males on an upper floor, and only partially visible to me behind a smoked glass

partition. Noura was probably my quietest student. I sat in conference with her once, in a monitored space designated for interaction between male faculty and their female students. Noura sat beside another female student who had to “translate” for her, as she was reluctant to speak in more than monosyllables to a male outside her family. This social inhibition only served to heighten the expressiveness and attention to detail in her writing. Noura’s journal demonstrated the rich emotional and intellectual life that thrives, to use the seeming inescapable cliché, “beneath the veil,” but especially how much of that expressive life, even in the most conservative of contexts, is now routinely mediated by globally-connected digital devices.

The hyper-connectedness of Saudi families, and the international context in which family relations played out, was a feature of several journals. “Maria” describes family life in a transnational space mediated by digital devices, and then reflects on the special nature of “digital liminality” for Saudi females.

On Skype my brother Sultan told me about a funny incident at his military academy in New York. During plebe only two students are allowed to in a room. Breaking the rules Sultan gathered 20 people in one small room, mostly nonwhites. Suddenly a white American walks in and they all shouted “white is minority” and other stuff. They kept yelling till their first lieutenant caught them breaking the rules. My brother hid behind the door. The lieutenant punished his friends by sticking a tape on the wall and making them do pushups till the whole room is sweaty and the tape falls down. My brother couldn’t stop laughing from behind the door! When the punishment finally ended, his friends all drowned in sweat hugged him to wet him with sweat as a payback for what he did. I could barely stop laughing.

In this passage we see several ties that bind Saudis to an international network: school, sweat, military training, and narratizing their stories through digital media. Maria then reflected on how for many Saudi females, participation in digital media is an escape from confinement:

The Internet has given me hours of entertainment and I can’t imagine life without it. Living in Saudi Arabia, there’s very little for a girl to do. The Internet provides us a magical window where we are given visual access to the world out there. This has added

unlimited amounts of joy for me and has drastically improved my quality of life.The Internet in some way provides me an escape from the four walls in my room, and allows me to experience things that I wouldn't have never had experienced.

The “sense of freedom” for this Saudi female student is structured by her confinement within four walls. My female students invariably describe digital media as an escape.

I wish to end with a reflective account by a student whose travels and explorations have left her felt cut off from some friends and family members who tried to force her confinement.

C). Dissolution and an Uncertain Transition

“Rima” has spent extensive time abroad, and self-identifies as a “Western Arab.” This has led to a disengagement from her Saudi context. But she rejects any suggestion that she is not fully Saudi, or a proud Muslim. Her journal indicates just how tricky the re-integration process may be as Saudis gain ever fuller access to the lifestyles and worldview of other peoples.

Digital technology gave people access to *substances* they lacked in their own culture, therefore making the later generations noticeably different from the previous ones. A flower doesn't grow in the middle of the desert, because it lacks the *elements* which would help its survival. The flower represents my personality. It wouldn't have *flourished* in the culture I was raised in, but with elements from the outside world it did develop.

Rima uses the metaphor of a flower in the desert to suggest that many young Saudi women now feel that they cannot receive adequate cultural nourishment in the “extreme confinement” of the home culture. Yet this merely feeds their palpable *hunger for nourishment*. Moreover, however much they express a genuine dedication to the values of the home culture, they are increasingly convinced that the *substances* they need to flourish (as professionals, as humans) cannot be had at home. Their forays away from the norms of the home culture become ever longer. Being so different while abroad—or while in the space of digital liminality—has led to a growing sense of

a split self. Rima describes this almost as a form of cultural schizophrenia, in which “foreign elements” become necessary for psychological survival, and yet lead to painful social conflict.

Developing a personality that is different from my family’s made it hard to fit in among my family and friends. The way I speak, dress, and behave have changed over time, which discomfited some people close to me.... I started to act differently around some relatives. I changed the way I dress, and I became cautious of every word I say around them. *This act of duplicity goes against my religion, and morals* [and] harmed me most.

Rima observed a disjuncture between the materialism and smugness of her home culture, and its insular spirituality that demands conformity in appearance, action, and thought. For those who have become accustomed to getting nutrition abroad, or in digital space, it is the demand for conformity in thought which becomes impossible to fulfill. The expression of non-conformity, inevitably, has to be confined to digital space, or time abroad. But young people increasingly have social interactions, in person, with friends who have developed new freedoms in these alternative spaces. This can lead to cognitive dissonance, or even condemnation. Rima write that a friend commented on how “she’s so different online!” As a result, Rima has become “selective about the things I share with people.”

I’m less selective on the Internet, in which I share my thoughts more openly. Giving my opinion on politics is taken seriously on the Internet, but in the real world most people would show their disinterest in my opinion because of age and gender differences. I’m not less mature in the material world, but I’m not given the chance to prove otherwise.

The pressure Rima feels—trying to squeeze her larger self into a social space that still cannot accommodate her—has led her into areas of consciousness that may be unprecedented in modern Saudi Arabia. She wrote that tradition has become a “dead weight” on her, and her generation.

Previous generations impose their traditions on our generation. Ibn Khaldun says, “Blindly following ancient customs and traditions doesn’t mean that the dead are alive, but that the living are dead.”²¹ A huge part of our generation is dead, and refuses to come back to life. I, like many individuals around the world have to be dead, because living is too dangerous for others around us.

I found Rima's journal to be especially poignant: it was the clearest expression I saw of just how challenging re-integration is going to be for the more thoughtful or "critical" Saudis who have been exposed to transnational norms. Before I left Saudi Arabia, Rima sought my counsel about the benefits and drawbacks of going as an exchange student to a small college in West Virginia. After I left the Kingdom, at her request, I wrote her a letter of recommendation, and she departed for a year abroad. Her liminality has thus continued in an even more intensive fashion. When she does return (and the alternative, my Saudi female students told me, is all but unthinkable), her sense of displacement will presumably be even more acute.

Conclusion

The concept of "digital liminality" merits further investigation in a number of fields, I believe. Saudi students are not qualitatively different from other people in their generation, who have been the subject of studies by scholars such as Sherry Turkle, Katie Davis, and Howard Gardner. Experiential evidence suggests, however, that their use of digital technologies is quantitatively different. This "eye test" observation is not scientific. But it is a perception shared by many of my professional colleagues who have taught students in China, Southeast Asia, other parts of the Middle East, Europe, and in the United States.

The transnational investment of youth culture in digital media has revolutionized the way we do business in many ways: how new movies are promoted, for example. It is inevitably also going to change many of the ways we think about, and practice, higher education. My purpose in this essay has been to find out what Saudi students had to say about their digital liminality.

The unmeasured way in which Saudi youths are living through their cells is closely connected to the multiple confinements of their deeply conservative society. Females are confined more radically; therefore their escape through digital means is more variegated, and more passionate. Maria called the Internet a “*magical window*” which is so desired precisely because “*there’s very little for a girl to do*” within the Kingdom. Her description of the “*unlimited amounts of joy*” which many young women in KSA feel the internet provides is explicitly linked to “an escape from the four walls in my room.”

As such, the experiential knowledge of the “digital kingdom” for Saudi women fits within the dynamics of the romance tradition. In traditional romances, women are confined with towers, country estates, etc. The romances they consume serve as escape from their four walls, rounded tower, etc. Within those confinements, their minds can and do travel far and wide. Thus when Fiona breaks out in some romantic clichés when the masked Shrek comes to rescue her, he say: “You’ve had a lot of time to plan this, haven’t you?”

The confinements and veils of Saudi society still place major restrictions on appearance, movements, and public speech. However, these limits have increasingly become meaningless in digital space. Young Saudis, especially women, have taken full advantage of that opening. Various forms of freedom of expression *in digital space* that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago are in full swing now. This opening is being driven not only by the pervasive, practically unchecked use of digital media, but by the extraordinary numbers of Saudi students who are studying in the United States and in the UK.²² The knowledge that they are bringing back through their material and digital travels can no longer be controlled, although the degree to which they can comment outside of digital forums on what they know remains to be seen.

It is even more uncertain how much of the lifestyle choices to which young Saudis have been exposed can be enacted in their home country. These returning Saudis have an appetite for a wide variety of trends, ranging from alternative energy, to going to the cinema, to simply driving a car. Some of these things can be enacted, and some cannot, as of yet. What I have learned from my students is that their mobilization process is in a fairly advanced stage, on-line. Not all would agree with Rima that the weight of an uncritical tradition makes the present generation zombie-like. But virtually all live in the certainty that what they have learned during their liminal phases is a subterranean force. Even though it cannot yet break to the surface, is going to make the “technological unconscious” of the Middle East a new sort of king-maker during the coming re-integration process (Beer 2009).

Notes

¹ The experience of liminality amongst first-year students: Palmer et. al, "Betwixt Spaces: Student Accounts of Turning Point Experiences in the First-Year Transition" (2009). See also: Crystal Faris, "Betwixt and Between: Tweens in the Library." *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children* 7.1 (2009): 43-45; Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. "Betwixt And Between? Women, the Nation and Islamization in Pakistan." *Social Identities* 13.1 (2007): 19-29; Small, Ivan, "Betwixt and Between: Tragedies and Memories of the Vietnamese Exodus in Film and Audience," *Visual Anthropology* Vol. 27 Issue 1-2 (Jan-Apr 2014, 197-200).

² Tom Shachtman, *Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish*. Boston: North Point Press, 2007. "The Future of the Amish." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.46 (July 20, 2007): B4.

³ Szakolczai 2009, 147-148.

⁴ Szakolczai 2009, 148.

⁵ Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (Anchor Edition, 1991), p. 21.

⁶ Palmer et al, "Betwixt Spaces: Student Accounts of Turning Point Experiences in the First-Year Transition" (2009).

⁷ Cross-cultural initiation: Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. Harper and Row, 1958.

⁸ Student struggles in Freshman English are such that some instructors recommend jettisoning essay assignments as a means of easing student pain. See Rebecca Schuman, “Let’s kill the college essay,” *Slate* (Dec. 16, 2013). Re: Arabian post-literacy, an *Arab News* survey found that “The average Arab child reads only “six minutes” a year in comparison to Western children, who average around 12,000 minutes a year,” and that “An adult in the Arab world reads on average a quarter of a page a year compared to an American adult, who reads around 11 books.” Ali Fayyaz, “Most people prefer not to read, survey shows,” *Arab News* (Nov. 3, 2013).

⁹ Karl Jaspers, quoted in Thomassen 2009, p. 19-20.

¹⁰ Arpad Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology* (Routledge, 2000), 220; Thomassen 2009, 23. “Fixed” liminal states: Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” reprinted in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study*, ed. Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1985: 46-55.

¹¹ Bjørn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2 (1), (2009) p. 5-27.

¹² Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, “Introduction: Liminality and Cultures of Change,” *International Political Anthropology* 2 (1), (2009), pp. 3-4.

¹³ Arpad Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events,” *International Political Anthropology* 2 (1): (2009), 141-172 (p. 141).

¹⁴ Gregory Stephens, “Recording the Rhythm of Change: A Rhetoric of Revolution in *The Square*,” published in Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the Kef Institute of Studies in Humanities, Jendouba University, Tunisia, ed. Leila Hejaiej (2014). This presentation was also published under the same title in *Bright Lights Film Journal* (May 7, 2014).

¹⁵ Gregory Stephens, “Auto-ethnography & Coming of Age stories in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” paper prepared for END 2014 - International Conference on Education and New Developments. June 28-30, Madrid, Spain.

¹⁶ Peter Homas, *Jung in Context* (London 1979), 207.

¹⁷ Peter Homas, *Jung in Context* (London 1979), p. 207.

¹⁸ The notion of “meditative benefits” was developed in a student personal essay about golf, in the useful “Student Essay in Progress” in Rosa and Eschholz, *Models for Writers* (2007: 31-40).

¹⁹ ESPN News Services, “Pitino Thinks Social Media is “poison,” *ESPN* (February 20, 2014)

²⁰ Marc Parry, “Young People Let Digital Apps Dictate Their Identities, Say 2 Scholars,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 28, 2013).

²¹ Born in Tunis in 1332, Ibn Khaldun was a historian, and is considered one of the founding fathers of sociology, historiography, and economics. Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun: Life and Times* (Edinburg UP, 2011); Syed Farid Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology* (Routledge, 2014).

²² There were only about 1,000 Saudis studying in the U.S. in 2004, but in 2011, Saudi Arabia sent 66,000 students to U.S. universities. That makes it “the fastest-growing source of foreign students in the U.S., ahead of China.” Ellen Knickmeyer, “Saudi Students Flood In as U.S. Reopens Door,” *Wall Street Journal* (Nov. 8, 2012). The total number of Saudi students in the U.S. at present seems to be well in excess of 100,000.

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