

Being Foreign

Written by Anonymous, CET Jordan: Intensive Language | Fall 2018

Who is the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece?: "Mixed race and biracial students"

"You know," says the Uber driver, eyes wide and serious, "they'll think you're one of theirs, until the moment you open up your mouth." After discovering my plans to study abroad in an Arab country, the fifty-something had taken to describing his days, long-past, stationed overseas. Apart from plucking up the edge of my left eyebrow, his comment didn't come off as obnoxious. I am the coalescence of parents light and dark: curly-haired and brown-eyed, with skin the color of honey. While his skin mirrored my father's - dark like morning coffee - by American measures, we are both Black. Even obviously so.

Although I cherish my Blackness and take pride in the achingly beautiful triumphs, losses, and continuing battles for racial equity and justice embedded in the history of Black Americans (which quite literally paved the way for my existence) - I take issue with the logic that labels me so obviously Black in the eyes of my fellow Americans. I could never comfortably or uncontentiously identify myself as white, and I have never been described as such, although, in calling myself Black, I am virtually never questioned. However, given that I am equally white and Black, this makes no objective sense. This inherently racist logic works only from the point of view that any amount of Blackness "taints" and overrides a legitimate claim to whatever whiteness is.

However, for me, living and studying in Jordan was generally a sort of relief from the questions and pressures of identity that I have lived with my entire life. In fact, it was almost the exact inverse of the usual racial profiling that may be experienced in the United States. I was already at somewhat of an advantage because I had regularly volunteered with groups of Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugees and immigrants in my community for as long as I had been studying Arabic, so I had some understanding of colloquial dialects and prior exposure to the culture. As long as I wasn't in a gaggle of Americans, dressed and conducted myself in a non-conspicuous manner, and didn't say much, any unscrupulous person that I encountered would naturally speak to me in Arabic. As I settled into the country, growing in confidence, taking to the language, and speaking more, I was routinely confusing people: was I Jordanian? yes, I am American, but what were my origins? Was I Arab? No? Well, where did I learn Arabic, then?

Although it was my first time in a foreign country, my first time being or feeling alien to the land I resided in, unlike many of my friends, my ability to blend in and be accepted depended almost entirely on my language skills and the clothes that I wore. The perception of race is what stays after everything else has been

assimilated; my fair-haired, blue-eyed friends could never wash away their features. While, as time passed, I was increasingly able to manipulate my desired level of foreign-ness, and how I wanted to be perceived, they could never choose not to be obviously alien. They were at a much greater risk of being taken advantage of, ripped off, and at times, harassed. In terms of language acquisition, I was at an unmistakable advantage to many of my fairer peers, who were immediately plucked out as foreign, and would inevitably be addressed in English. I, however, experienced a much-welcome reprieve from navigating spaces of black or white, always having to slip into one incomplete version of myself. In my own country, I'm always foreign somehow: the Black girl in a white family or the lightskin among deeper shades. Funnily enough, in Jordan, it was totally possible for me to be just one light brown face in a sea of light brown faces... until I opened my mouth.