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New Place, Same Race: A Mixed American Reckons with her Ethnicity in Europe

“Miss, we need you to step aside.”

I had just gotten through immigration, landing back on Scottish soil after a weekend trip to Stockholm, Sweden. After four extra pat-downs, five failed attempts at reading Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*, and a six-hour layover in Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, all I wanted to was get back to my flat in Edinburgh’s Southside and eat a curry. I was hoping to get out of the white lights of the immigration checkpoint and home before 10 pm. I wasn’t sure if that call was for me, so I kept walking.

“Miss! We need to check your passport!” the police officer called at me. I stopped in my tracks, turning back around to face the police and immigration officers. I walked over to them, removing the navy blue and white anchor patterned cloth cover with from my passport and handed it over.

“Oh? You’re American,” the British immigration officer with a black bob said, holding the navy leatherette covered passport in her hands. “Well, we don’t really need to check you,” she said it not to me, but to the white police officer next to her. This was no longer just a random check. It was about my race.

“We already have you over here, so we might as well,” the cop responded to the immigration officer, again not to me. The immigration officer scanned my passport then flipped through the pages, seeing I’d been to Paris and Amsterdam, before stopping on my Tier Four, UK Border Agency issued student visa.

“So,” she asked in her Scottish accent, “what’re ya doing in Edinburgh?” A typical immigration question.

“I’m a student at the University of Edinburgh,” I responded flatly.

“Oh, really? Where d’ya live?”

“I’m over in Sciennes.” I couldn’t remember if my uni address was on my Visa or not as she double-checked my details.

“Oi! That’s where she used to live,” the blond cop pointed to the officer next to him and laughed, “Before she got kicked out!” The immigration officer smiled and snorted a short laugh.

“Alright,” she said and handed me back my passport. “You’re all clear. Good luck at uni.”

I walked away with a pit in my stomach, boarded the Airbus back into Edinburgh’s City Center, and walked back to Sciennes. Standing outside my flat and fishing for my keys in my backpack, I wondered which flat that immigration officer lived in.

While this wasn’t my first encounter with the microaggressions of race, it certainly was my first experience of blatant racial profiling. As a biracial woman (half-Filipina half-white), there’s always someone around to comment on my race. It was always the offhand comments that were never meant to offend being thrown in my direction.

Once before a college party, I was kneeling on the floor and drinking out of a bag of wine. My housemate that held the bag of wine above me said, “you look like an Asian pornstar!” I spit the wine out on the carpeted floor.

It didn’t occur to me until two years later that that’s how people saw my race, as a sexualized but obedient Asian girl. These microaggressions became glaringly visible during my time at Saint Joseph’s, a primarily white, Catholic university in the US. I thought maybe it would be different at the University of Edinburgh, hoping for a less homogenous student population.

During my first few weeks as a visiting student in Edinburgh, three separate white men on three separate busses asked me, “are you Chinese?”

When I said no, I’m American, they would immediately respond with the classic, “but where are you *really* from?”

“Philadelphia.”

Follow ups ranged from “Yeah, but where are you *really really* from?” to “Do you watch the Colbert Report” and even an awkward conversation about the *Rocky* movies.

While these conversations were deep-sigh-eye-roll annoying at best and “leave me the fuck alone” inducing at worst, it reminded me that I still had a lot to learn about navigating my racial ambiguity and my brownness in Europe.

I learned early on how to get through airport security with ease. Travelling with Diabetes requires a swabbing of my insulin pump, an additional pat down, and close inspection of my gallon Ziploc bag filled with supplies. Knowing how to deal with suspicion by airport security for medical reasons cushioned the blow of racial profiling.

When I began my trip to Sweden, I had been pulled aside by airport security for an additional “random check”. I passed through the metal detector quickly because I’d already detached my pump and left my continuous glucose monitor in my bag. Acting as though I wasn’t a diabetic and going through the old metal detectors instead of a full body scanner meant I could get in and out of security in under 5 minutes if there weren’t too many other travellers waiting in line.

When I was pulled aside by a heavy set, blonde woman with a navy blue Edinburgh Airport fleece vest, I was asked a series of questions. My age range, my nationality, and my ethnicity all came into question before I was given one last pat down and sent on my way. I didn’t think too much of it at the time, other than remembering the stories of racial profiling of Middle Eastern and South Asian people in post-911 America. This wasn’t like that; it was congenial and efficient. I went on my way.

During my year abroad, I travelled throughout Europe, trying to soak everything in. A weeklong trip to France included trips to Giverny and Versailles, places I’d been longing to see since I was a child. It also included the realization that because of my Asian ambiguity, many Parisians assumed I was of Vietnamese descent and spoke French fluently, a call back to their colonial history. Similar things happened in Berlin, with their Pacific Island colonies.

In a stroke of luck, my race was no longer seen as “suspicious foreigner” or “annoying, loud American.” In many of these places, I was seen as a product of their colonization, accepted more freely to the native populations because they assumed I was formerly their property. Though I can’t deny the racism behind that

ideology, the stereotypes about being an American abroad were eased by my ambiguity. I took comfort in it at the time, coming to terms with my mixed racial identity as a fluid, important part of me.

Though quick to shed my American nationality, there were also times when I had to acknowledge that my US passport granted me safety that I wouldn't have otherwise been afforded. In the UK, no one doubted my status as a visiting student upon seeing my American passport. I never had to send in extra documents to confirm my financial status when applying for my visa because the US is considered low-risk. I never had to register myself with the police. Other study abroad students I met from non-EU countries that weren't low-risk didn't have those luxuries. I was often met at immigration with smiles upon seeing my passport; they were met with shifty glances.

I clung to my passport as my safety net. My racial ambiguity might cause security and police checks, but when it comes down to it, at least my nationality will never be questioned.

When each study abroad student returns to Saint Joseph's University, a mandatory exit interview is required before your transcripts can be processed. I walked into the Center for International Programs on a late August afternoon, expecting to talk about my time at Edinburgh University, travelling, and culture shock upon returning. I sought relief from the heat and humidity in their air-conditioned offices, wiping the sweat off my brow as my interview with Health and Safety Coordinator, Kelly, started. Midway through the interview, Kelly said something that completely caught me off guard.

"We don't send many non-white students abroad here. What's it like to not be white abroad?"

Oh, I had a plethora of stories for her.