

AS SOMEONE WHO WASN'T BORN HERE: A STATE OF PERPETUAL FOREIGNNESS

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I've always felt foreign, even when I was in Syria. I felt like I didn't belong; that I wasn't enough. Being gay and Muslim meant that I wasn't like the others, that I wouldn't be welcome, and that I was abnormally foreign. I thought that in some places, being gay was okay, and I believed the U.S. was one of those places. Coming to America was a dream – a dream of liberty, of freedom, of being myself, of finding happiness. I thought in America, I would belong. I wouldn't feel foreign anymore. Boy, was I wrong!

At first, I didn't want to go back to Syria– it didn't feel like home and I needed some time away. But after the war in Syria intensified and the U.S. imposed travel restrictions, going home was no longer an option. Here I am; where I thought I would feel at home but I don't. Instead, I feel trapped between a Syria that doesn't accept me and an America that will see me forever as foreign.

While talking with a White American friend about politics, he interjected, “As someone who was born here, I know how this works.” He needed to remind me that he was born here. Since I wasn't born here, I surely wouldn't know how “things work.” My opinions, my views, my outlook on an important social issue are to be disregarded. They are, after all, foreign– just like me. I wonder, what is the threshold of years required for this person to consider me as his equal?

I've heard many comments like: “in this country...” or “in America...” or “in American schools...” as reminders of my perpetual foreignness. When I felt irritated because a stranger asked about being gay and Muslim at the dinner table during Thanksgiving, my date responded, “they're just trying to get to know you,” which means that I'm the problem. I'm too sensitive, because I'm not satisfying people's need to know my story, because I'm not entertaining curious minds on cue.

Sometimes White Americans say, “I get asked questions all the time when I'm in Europe!” in so reflecting their inability to recognize the power they've claimed or were given. Being a Steve in France is very different from being a Musbah in Alabama. The French may make fun of Steve because he's American. They may ask silly questions about American culture. They may even tell Steve to return to America. But Steve holds power that comes from the assumption that “America is the greatest nation in the world.” Steve knows that he can go back to his country or he can use his all-powerful passport to go anywhere he wants. Steve, after all, is American.

But me, I am an object of suspicion as soon as I walk into a room. I am not only different, but also dangerous. I look like the pictures of terrorists on TV. The questions I get are not only silly stereotypes, but reflect deeply held assumptions. Questions like “do you have running water?” (which I've been asked) are beyond ignorant; they show how Americans see people from my part of the world as primitive, as less civilized. Which makes me either a very exciting or a very dangerous foreigner depending on the time of day and how long I grow out my beard.

The foreignness I experience isn't numerical. I felt foreign when I lived in Syria surrounded by people who looked and sounded like me. Foreignness isn't about being the only one, but about which ways of being, thinking, and living are welcome and which are incompatible with White America. Foreignness means never being a true American, never feeling good enough, being constantly undermined, delegitimized, and exoticized. Foreignness is loving America, but knowing it will never love you back. The values that brought me here, liberty, freedom, and equality, turned out to be imperfect and incomplete.

They say that a fish in a lake is unaware of the water because the water is everywhere. Most White Americans seem to be content swimming carefree, but what might happen if they saw the world outside of their lake? What if White Americans questioned the unquestionable and the taken for granted assumptions they've carried all their lives? What if White Americans took responsibility for their privilege and the privilege of their ancestors? What if White Americans recognized that they might be wrong, that they're not the center of the universe?

Maybe then we can have true liberty, true freedom, and true equality. Maybe then the boy who grows up feeling perpetually foreign could find true belonging. Maybe then I could truly call this land my home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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