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Passing as White, Flaming as Arab

Why Mixed-Heritage Arab American Women Writers Choose Not to "Pass" as White and Instead to "Flame" as Arab

"You're Arab American?"

"Yep." I nod, knowing what they'll say next.

"I never would've guessed. You don't even look Arab."

"That's what people tell me," I say with a smile, shrugging my shoulders.

Over the years, I've played with different responses, having heard this reaction innumerable times from both Arabs and non-Arabs. The conversation usually lasts less than a minute, and the other person typically doesn't bother to ask my name. I used to try to point out that the idea of "looking Arab," aside from comparing real people to stereotypes, is a dangerous political concept, especially since 9/11, as individuals and communities have been targeted with an Orientalist "lookism." But recently, I've opted to defuse with subtlety.

Because of my parents' early experiences around ethnicity, we had no room to talk about race when I was growing up—it was important for us to ignore difference. In the late 1940s, Dad came home from the first day of kindergarten and declared to his grandparents, who had emigrated from Lebanon and Syria, to speak to him in English because he was American. My mother's upper-class English paternal grandparents had disowned her nuclear family when she was young, justifying it in part because her mother had Irish and Scottish heritage, which they considered inferior. My parents needed us to be white, middle-class Americans.

Growing up, we interacted a great deal with Mom's extended family, but rarely with Dad's, whom he had left behind in Detroit at age 18, when he joined the Marines and moved to California. After high school, I lived in Spain for two years, which opened my eyes to different ways of living and planted the seed for me to start questioning everything, including my own identity.

In my twenties, I was politically active, particularly in the struggle to free political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal. September 11 sparked my Arab activism. But as I began to speak out on behalf of Arabs, I didn't yet understand that included me. When people asked me if I was Arab, I forced myself to say yes, in spite of the voices in my head that said I wasn't "authentic," since I didn't "act" or "look" Arab. It took me years to realize that my Arab heritage was my birthright. I've heard other mixed Arabs share similar stories, such as comedians Aron Kader and Dean Obeidallah.

Most of my early activism involved combating clichéd portrayals of West Asians and North Africans in the media. Asserting my own

Arab identity became part of that work. I've heard other mixed-heritage Arab Americans say that the surge of anti-Arab racism in the post-9/11 world made them step up and speak out.

Still, many people don't understand my choice. If I can "pass" as white, why do I choose to "flame" as Arab? If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I'd say it allows me to show more of myself and to connect with others in meaningful ways.

What do I mean by "pass" and "flame"? "Passing" names the act of blending into the dominant society in order to avoid being targeted by racism, a phenomenon that has been well documented, particularly about the African American experience. "Flaming" comes from queer studies and the gay-rights movement and typically describes the ways gay men communicate their sexual identities. I've never heard it used in conversations about race and ethnicity, but when trying to define the opposite of passing, I think "flaming" captures the complexities of communicating oneself through body language, dress, conversation, written word, relationships, etc.

Many well-established Arab American women writers are mixed-heritage, with one white and one Arab parent, and could pass as white but instead flame as Arab. I wanted to know about their experiences. Why and how did they come to express their identity as they do? My intention in looking at this group is not to promote colorism or to privilege them for their whiteness, but I assumed that they too had faced white racism and the pressure to pass within their own home. (I distinguish white racism, which institutions and white folks direct against people of color, from internalized racism, which people of color direct against their own communities or other communities of color.)

So I interviewed writer and scholar Amira Jarmakani, novelist and memoirist Diana Abu-Jaber, playwright and actor Leila Buck, poet and essayist Lisa Suhair Majaj, and poet and author Naomi Shihab Nye. While no one had ever thought about identifying as Arab American as "flaming," everyone shared that they have been perceived as white and non-white, depending on the circumstance, which fits into the Arab American racial experience of "not quite white." They all experienced assimilation on some level, such as attending American schools while living abroad, being told by their parents that they were white, or not having contact with their Arab extended family. Most grew up in the United States, although some spent at least one year, and sometimes many, living in Arab countries. All of the women were in their twenties when they began to identify as Arab American. Here I highlight some of the things they had to say. I've kept their quotes anonymous to highlight the universality of their experiences.

> "I suppose you could say I 'flame.' I hate to use the language of 'coming out,' and this might have that ring to it, but I remember having a strong sense before my first book was published that

it was really going to frame me as Arab American, and I felt a lot of pressure to get it just right because of that."

"I don't relate to the term 'flaming' because I don't think claiming my identity is 'over the top.' I think it is a normal and natural thing to do. What is more abnormal, I think, is to hide my identity, which I used to do. It was easier that way, and I could 'pass.' But is it normal not to just be who you are and feel okay with that? At a certain point I made a choice not to hide my identity. Is not hiding who you are the same thing as flaming? Are those the only two options?"

"I don't like the word 'flame'—it feels like an almost aggressive thing. To me, I choose to shine as an Arab. To illuminate stories that wouldn't be heard or seen otherwise. To represent my family's and friends' stories and places I have called home and that have welcomed me to people who would not otherwise see them."

"What's hard about it is that which makes claiming any disenfranchised identity hard. It reminds me of Sara Ahmed's 'Feminist Killjoys' in some ways—you become marked as someone who is creating conflict because folks find it easier to project all of their feelings of discomfort onto your decision to outwardly mark, and claim, something that is usually tacitly or passively marked in the 'colorblind' sense. So you become a receptacle for a whole mess of unarticulated emotions that otherwise don't have a focused point to land."

"Now I do claim my identity and often make the choice to claim it even in situations where it would be more comfortable not to. It is a choice much of the time and that is the privilege my appearance and accent give me. I keep that privilege in mind and try to be conscious of how to use it."

"For me, choosing to speak from my Arab identity has a lot to do with a sense of ethical responsibility to speak out against injustice, no matter how uncomfortable it might be to do so. People have said to me that they don't understand why I care so much about my homeland or why I bother to speak out—that it doesn't affect my life. They have no clue how much my life has been affected by being Arab, but they are in some ways right: I live a safe and comfortable life completely removed from the violence and suffering that characterizes so much of my people's experience. But that's precisely why I feel the need to speak out—I have the privilege to do so."

"Claiming my Arab heritage has given me a wider, bigger life! When I am in the Middle East, I feel I am treated with even

more hospitality and interest than a non-Arab would be—there is a sense of deep belonging and understanding."

"I identify as a woman of color, while recognizing that I benefit from white privilege in many ways. So for me, it is and will always be fraught—but how can it not be? I do this knowing that the very category 'woman of color' is constantly shifting, and will likely take other forms in the coming years and decades. I choose this for political reasons, because I identify with and am in solidarity with the struggles for social justice that I see as defining the identification."

"I am privileged in many ways to pass, so I don't often identify as a woman of color—but I do see many situations and conversations from that perspective, and that is when I find myself invited into that community/group/identity by those who don't always have the choice. I also don't want to demonize 'whiteness,' or generalize about what that means."

"Growing up, we were taught we were white and Arab. I was always in a bicultural mood and my parents seemed proud of this for their children. If asked to choose between identifying as a woman of color or white, I choose woman of color, because it's more interesting."

"I made a decision to identify as Arab American because I wanted to be in solidarity with the friends who didn't have a choice. I remember when an Iranian friend went to donate blood after 9/11 in New York City. As he stood in line someone spat on him and told him to go back where he came from. He was much darker than I, with a beard. He didn't have a choice of when to be perceived as 'Middle Eastern' (since the kind of person who spits on someone doesn't know that Iranians aren't Arab anyway). I wanted to make sure that folks knew that I was Arab no matter what and that 'Arab' has a lot of different looks, people, and perspectives that they may not recognize at first given the stereotypes and negative images that we see."

"I decided to identify as Arab American when I was a young writer in my twenties after meeting other Arab American writers. It felt like a revelation, like finding a larger family. As time went on I asserted myself as an Arab more and more. It felt comfortable. I try to write about both worlds. I don't mind such hinges. Writing out of Arab experience, or as witness to the Arab experience, has been crucial to me and I feel very proud to be Arab American."

"I used to wear a map of my homeland around my neck and I'd pull it out when I felt confident and hide it when I didn't. Passing was a choice for me then, and it is something I chose often because of my insecurities. But once I began to find a political voice, it was harder to choose to pass: it's one thing to pass in terms of appearance and not making waves, but when you have to cut off your voice, cut off your tongue to pass—that comes at a cost. So then I realized, whatever I decide to do, there's a cost—am I willing to pay that cost? I think we think of passing being the easier way out and in many contexts it has been the 'easy' choice. But it comes with a cost."

"Growing up, we really didn't discuss our heritage much. Dad always told us we were Arab, and I started getting identified that way in graduate school, so I went with it. But then I had other teachers and friends who tried to convince me to change my last name, at least professionally, so my writing wouldn't be ghettoized—hidden back on the 'multi-culti' shelf at the bookstore."

"I am very proud of my Arab heritage. The food, the music, the people—there is so much brilliance and history. It's like getting to live inside of two beautiful homes instead of just one. Really, I feel so lucky and proud to be connected with the Arab world. What's hard about claiming my Arab heritage is, you know, the Orientalist schisms—the fear and jolts of ignorance that come up especially in our media. And then the matter of our foreign policy, feeling divided between the love of America and that of the Middle East, as if you're born to warring parents—witnessing the mistreatment of the Palestinians, the unrest in Syria—it's all terribly close to home."

"I'm angry about what my wonderful country the United States of America does to Arabs in Arab countries. I can imagine the suffering sorrowing people in the news with more piercing empathy and grief than a person who has never been to the Middle East might experience. The war in Iraq absolutely broke my heart. I grieve even more than many other rational Americans might about the one-sidedness of our support to Israel all these years, and the sham of our pretense—we have never been a balanced broker in the region, yet we pretend to be."

"My white family is more passively racist than outwardly so—the 'colorblind' version of racism. As a child, everyone was pretty united on the passing/assimilation front. If anything came up around ethnicity, say, in the news, we pretty much adhered to a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, which is to say it was something that was clearly present and willfully not discussed.

One Thanksgiving when I was in my late twenties, things crystallized for me. We got into a discussion about World War II and Japanese internment, and a family member basically told me that if the government had decided to intern Arab Americans after 9/11, she would have been okay with that. The fact that she would have condoned sending her relatives—including me—to such a camp highlighted the presence of unspoken racism that I had previously only suspected."

"At the age of four, I came home from school one day and told my mom, 'Don't talk to me, speak to me.' She was totally confused at first but finally understood that I meant, 'Don't talk to me in Arabic.' I have no memory of that day but can only assume that kids at school made fun of me for speaking it—what else would make me reject it from one day to the next? And my mother just wanted me to belong in a way she never could, fully, as an American. So she stopped speaking her mother tongue to me. It wasn't until years later, in college, that I studied the grammar, the structure of the language. But I really learned to speak by going to live with my mother's extended family, where I learned—or, remembered—the way a child does—surrounded by the language in its natural habitat—pouring from the mouths of people who love me."

My great-aunt Agnes, who immigrated to Detroit from Syria as a girl, made a needlepoint wall hanging that hung in her living room for decades. It read in Arabic and English, "She who denies her heritage has no heritage." Had I grown up around her, my journey might have looked different. I might have assumed I'm Arab without question. But because of my experience, I think everyone chooses their identity—even when they don't realize they've made a choice—and that every identity is a performance.

These mixed-heritage Arab American women writers' experiences show that identity is not static, it shape-shifts along with people's understanding of themselves, and it can serve as a powerful tool to connect with broader communities for storytelling, activism, and a sense of self. *m*