

NOT QUITE WHITE: THE DIARY OF A LEBANESE AMERICAN

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INTRODUCTION

When asked to write an autobiography concerning how my race has affected me throughout my life, I had to first consider what race actually is. Race is defined as “a category of human kind that shares certain distinctive physical traits.”¹ For me, writing an autobiography based on race would be more difficult than it is for others, due to the fact that courts and society recognize four races: Black, Asian, Caucasian, and American Indian,² none of which clearly include Arab Americans. Secondly, I considered the term ethnic, which is defined as “relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background.”³ My ethnicity being Lebanese or Arab, I have learned that for minorities, it is very difficult to know where you stand in the United States.⁴

CASE LAW

In class we read five cases concerning the race of Arab Americans with each one having very different results. *In re Najour* held that a Syrian man could be entitled to naturalization, and considered him a “free white person” within the meaning of the immigration statute.⁵ However, a mere four years later in 1913, a South Carolina District Court decided *Ex Parte Shahid*, in which the court chose to skirt the issue of race and denied citizenship to a Syrian man.⁶ The court reasoned that the applicant was not one “whom to citizenship is likely to be for the

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¹ MERRIAM-WEBSTER’S DICTIONARY & THESAURUS 659 (2007).

² *In re Najour*, 174 F. 735, 735 (C.C.N.D. Ga. 1909).

³ MERRIAM-WEBSTER ONLINE DICTIONARY, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnic> (last visited November 8, 2008).

⁴ In 1909, Judge Newman wrote in the *Najour* decision, “I consider the Syrians as belonging to what we recognize, and what the world recognizes, as the white race.” *Najour*, 174 F. at 735. The logic of Judge Newman’s decision in the *Najour* case was rejected by the Supreme Court in 1923. *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204, 208-9 (1923). The case made its way up the judicial ladder, revealing the ambiguous position of “Syrians” within the United States.

⁵ *Najour*, 174 F. at 736.

⁶ *Ex parte Shahid*, 205 F. 812, 816-17 (D. S.C. 1913).

benefit of the country” due to his imperfect English and religious choices.⁷ Two years later, the Court of Appeals held that “free white persons” within the meaning of the statute should not be limited to Europeans and consequently Syrians could be classified as white.⁸ In 1942, the court clearly had not made up its mind on the race issue when a Michigan District Court decided *In re Ahmed Hassan* where an Arab from Yemen petitioned for citizenship and was denied, mostly based on the darkness of his skin.⁹ Two years later, *Ex Parte Mohriez* decided that an Arabian is eligible for naturalization because Arabs have inhabited Europe and lived along the Mediterranean, making them white.¹⁰ These decisions had serious consequences for Arabs at the time, each denial stripping Arabs of any rights they may have. What the courts did not realize was the effects these decisions would have on Arabs for many years to come.

After reading these cases, I thought I would be clear on where Arab Americans stood on the issue of race. However, I found myself as confused as the courts seemed to be. To help clarify, I looked further in order to discover the rationale for the court’s decisions. The courts looked at a number of different things when making their decisions regarding Arabs and their “whiteness,” including skin color, religion, culture, and the likelihood that Arabs would intermarry. According to the courts, skin color should not control as long as the petitioner came within the loosely defined “white classification.” However, skin color seemed to be emphasized by the courts, often referring to the darkness of the petitioner’s skin. In one case, the court went so far as to classify the petitioner’s skin color to be “that of a walnut”¹¹ prior to denying his citizenship. The darker the skin, the less “white” they were and the more likely they were to be denied rights. The Courts also focused on the religion of the petitioner: Christians had more of a chance to succeed in their efforts to gain citizenship, while Muslims were dismissed as polygamists.¹²

⁷ *See id.* at 812, 816.

⁸ *Dow v. United States*, 226 F. 145, 148 (4th. Cir. 1915)

⁹ *In re Hassan*, 48 F. Supp. 843, 844, 845 (D. Mich. 1942)

¹⁰ *Ex parte Mohriez*, 54 F. Supp. 941, 942 (D. Mass. 1944).

¹¹ *Shahid*, 205 F. at 813.

¹² *Hassan*, 48 F. Supp. at 845 (“Arabs as a class are not white and therefore not eligible for citizenship.”). The judge also noted that “[a]part from the dark skin of the Arabs, it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominantly Christian peoples of Europe.” *Id.*

To the average reader this may seem like boring case history, but to me this tells a whole different story. The Courts' indecisiveness has directly affected how society views Arab Americans today and more importantly, how we view ourselves. As one might expect, the uncertainty expressed by the courts through the conflicting decisions is nothing in comparison to living this confusion. My entire life I have walked the line between white and non-white. Just as the courts judged each petitioner, everyone who looks at me or meets me is doing the same. I feel as though I will forever be standing before a court that assess my darker skin tone, my religion, and other "non-white" features I may have. What do others see when they look at me? What do I see when I look at myself? In the end, the conclusion is generally "not-quite-white."

CHILDHOOD

As a child, I quickly realized I was different from the other children at school. I could not trace my differences to race, but without realizing it, I was striving to be white in order to fit in. Growing up in a predominately white area on Long Island, I thought (and hoped) I would grow up and "turn white" like everyone else. When I realized this wasn't the case, I had to take matters into my own hands. I experienced a kind of reverse-ethnocentrism, wherein I rejected anything that would display my non-white status. I was constantly being pulled in both directions, but in the end, I wanted to be normal, I wanted to be white. Language played a big factor in this: I have early memories of my parents speaking to me in Arabic and my English responses, and my grandmother begging me to call her *teta* and my outright refusal to do so.

Food was another issue; when friends came over I was embarrassed by these strange dishes they had never seen before. At lunch I would quickly throw away my sandwich if it was on pita bread because it was different from the white bread sandwiches the other students were eating. I wanted my mom to stop making traditional Lebanese dishes and stick to American cuisine.

My parents wanted us to have pride in our ethnicity, introducing us to other Arab children and trying to get us to spend our summers in Lebanon. Both of these suggestions were immediately turned down as I invited over fair-skinned, blonde girls and spent my summers at day camp like my friends. However, these summers led to another issue, my skin color. I was subconsciously aware of colorism, as even the "walnut-

skinned” Lebanese equate fair skin with beauty.¹³ My desire to play outside conflicted with my wanting to be white because sun was the enemy. Sun block and hats became my new best friend.

Up until the age of five, I went by *Misha* at school, a common nickname for those named Michelle in Lebanon. This was yet another victim of my attack on all things non-white. When I entered kindergarten, I allowed my parents to continue calling me *Misha*, but for school purposes, I dropped the nickname and decided to become Michelle—my better, whiter alter-ego. My behavior was of that discussed in *The Law and Economics of Critical Race Theory*, where the writer discusses how those with an ambiguous racial appearance have a tendency to perform in order to fit in.¹⁴ Whether it was unconscious or deliberate, I realized that the average person would not be able to discern my race or ethnicity. In order to tilt the scales towards white, I conformed to typical white stereotypes and behavior.

COLLEGE LIFE

My ability to remain white was tested when I entered my freshman year at Villanova University. Villanova is appropriately nicknamed “Vanilla-nova” due to its almost entirely white student and teacher population.¹⁵ There were very few people from minority groups, the small number belonging to sports team and spending all their time with each other. Once again, I did not know where I stood as an Arab American. Was I white? Did others think I was white? My “performance” would have to be perfect in order to be considered white in these surroundings. On a number of occasions, I completely rejected my ethnicity and allowed myself to be referred to as Italian because this seemed to be closer to white. I was unaware at the time that the majority of people, including the Supreme Court agreed with me. Sixty

¹³ This fact is evidenced by the number of ‘skin-lightening products’ that are sold in Lebanese pharmacies. It is not clear where the fascination with pale skin originated; some sociologists argue that dark skin is associated with lowly laborers who work in the outdoors.

¹⁴ See Devon W. Carbado & Mitu G. Gulati, *The Law and Economics of Critical Race Theory: Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, 112 *YALE L.J.* 1757, 1811 (May 2003) (book review).

¹⁵ For example, admission statistics for Villanova University School of Law show that only 18% of students accepted in 2008 were minority students. Villanova University School of Law, Admissions Statistical Profile, <http://www.law.villanova.edu/admissions/statisticalprofile/> (last visited Nov. 10, 2008). The undergraduate admission statistics do not even include the percentage of minority students entering in 2008. Villanova University, Admission Statistics, <http://www.villanova.edu/enroll/admission/application/undergrad/statistics.htm> (last visited Nov. 10, 2008).

percent of Canadian students saw Egyptians as non-white, while students were split down the middle when it came to Italians.¹⁶

ARABS POST 9/11

For a short period of time, Lebanese cuisine such as *hummus* and *tabbouleh* became increasingly popular with Americans. I would have my mom make this for the girls in my dormitory and was thrilled that I had found a place where my white and non-white self could co-exist.

This all came crashing down when tragedy struck and the finger was pointed at Arab Americans across the country. On September 11, 2001, my entire outlook on race and ethnicity changed. It was no longer about being normal and fitting in, it was now about taking myself further away from the negativity surrounding Arab Americans. Soon after the attacks, there was a focus on American fear and safety issues. Immigrants from countries that were known to harbor terrorists were forced to register with the United States government, the majority of which were Middle Eastern. Out of those who registered, the immigrants who had overstayed their visas were notified to attend hearings before an immigration judge and ultimately sent back to “their country.”¹⁷ Others chose not to register and either hid from the government or fled the country out of fear of being sent to a country they have little or no ties with. After this, every Arab became a suspect, a criminal, or a terrorist. Any pride I had in my ethnicity was tested as I saw people who looked just like me being accused of crimes and forced to return to “their” country.

MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF ARABS POST 9/11

My struggle with my race, or lack thereof, became more difficult once media outlets began focusing more on Arab Americans, and never in a positive way. One of the main sources of this negativity following September 11th was television and movies.

As much as I deny my ethnicity, it will forever affect the way I view the world. Because I do not see the world through “white eyes,” I am more likely to see underlying stereotypes or racism towards Arabs. One thing I have noticed is the lack of Arab Americans on television, and even fewer that will attest to their

¹⁶ Doug Daniels, *The White Race is Shrinking: Perceptions of Race in Canada and Some Speculations on the Political Economy of Race Classification*, in *CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR* 52 (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefanie eds., 1997).

¹⁷ Alisa Solomon, *Fleeing America*, *THE VILLAGE VOICE*, Sept. 9, 2003.

ethnicity. Like many minority groups, Arab Americans have a tendency not to identify with their ethnicity because they feel they will have more opportunities as a Caucasian. It is hard for me to have pride in my ethnicity when those people I have to look up to are constantly rejecting their “not-quite-whiteness.” After September 11th, this denial increased because there was a shift in the portrayal of Arab Americans on television. Prior to September 11th, Arab Americans were more often cast in neutral roles such as a rich, oil-owning Saudi Arabians, grocery store owners, or cab-drivers.¹⁸ Afterwards, the roles given to Arab Americans became increasingly more negative. They were most often portrayed as criminals or terrorists.¹⁹ In order to instill a sense of pride in my heritage, my parents would often point out actors and actresses that had broken out of Arab specific roles, such as Omar Sharif, Salma Hayek, and Tony Shalhoub. However, I was aware of the American sentiment towards Arabs and wanted nothing more than to move further away from my ethnicity.

Unfortunately, this was not the only media outlet that I saw to be tainted after September 11th. I began noticing that when Arab Americans were on the news, newscasters were sure to mention their ethnicity. For example, the newspaper would state that a “Moroccan bomber was detained after killing 30 people.”²⁰ Arab Americans, especially Muslims, became a separate society, and it was necessary to identify them as such. I knew that the ethnicity of these criminals, terrorists, and bombers were not mentioned for identification purposes because simply stating that a person is Arab says nothing about their appearance. The appearance of Arabs can vary from very dark to light skin, curly to straight hair, and these specific characteristics were not pointed out about the “criminal.” This is a phenomenon that has been affecting African and Latin Americans for many years.²¹ Nowhere

¹⁸ *But see* JACK G. SHAHEEN, REEL BAD ARABS: HOW HOLLYWOOD VILIFIES A PEOPLE 1 (2001). (discussing the history of the negative portrayal of Arabs in film).

¹⁹ Ashraf Khalil, *But Can You Play a Terrorist? - Actors of Arab Descent Face the Dilemma of Whether to be Typecast. It's Often the Only Work Available, but it Can Leave Some Feeling Guilty*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 4, 2007, at A1

²⁰ Suzanne Malveaux, *Suspected Moroccan Bomber Detained*, CNN, May 19, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/05/18/morocco.arrests/index.html>

²¹ Some examples include: A mug shot of a black defendant is four times more likely to appear in a local television news report than of a white defendant. The black accused is two times more likely to be shown physically restrained in a local television news report than when the accused is white. *See* ROBERT M.

on the news do we hear of an Irish, Italian, or Jewish criminal. Newspapers want their white readers to know that it is an Arab and not a white person committing these heinous crimes. The public is left with a story that singles out a person's race or ethnicity for no apparent reason other than to demonstrate that the stereotypes about these ethnic groups are true.²²

All of this negative publicity had a huge effect on me. All of a sudden, people who looked like me were only seen as suspects, criminals, or terrorists. I recently read an article entitled "Muslim Women: My Headscarf is Not a Threat," where a young woman recounted a story of a man approaching her in a store for the sole purpose of calling her a terrorist.²³ When she asked him if she looked like a terrorist, he responded, "What else does a terrorist look like?"²⁴ It was not news to me that almost seven years after the September 11th attacks there is still negativity surrounding Arab Americans. My surprise came from the fact that this girl who was being labeled as a terrorist could have been my sister. Her complexion and features were similar to mine; the only difference being that she was wearing a *hijab*. When I read this, I remembered a time, soon after September 11th when I was shopping in the city with a friend. It was a cold day so my friend had wrapped her head in a scarf in order to keep warm. In broad daylight a man felt the need to approach us and yell at us. Although he was speaking a different language, we both knew he was blaming us for September 11th. He finally left us alone when my friend removed her scarf and my eyes filled with tears. Unlike my friend, I could not remove my dark skin and hair in order to remove my "threatening" exterior. It was at this point I knew that even if the United States government held that Arab Americans have the "privilege" of being white, the average American sees me as a foreigner.

ENTMAN & ANDREW ROJECKI, THE BLACK IMAGE IN THE WHITE MIND: MEDIA AND RACE IN AMERICA 82-83(2000).

²² Such distorted representations of Arabs have a direct consequence upon Arab Americans nationwide. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee reported during the Persian Gulf War there was a "drastic increase" in hate crimes against Arabs from the previous year. See Mohammad Bazzi, *The Arab Menace*, PROGRESSIVE, Aug. 1995 at 40, 40.

²³ Brian Rokus, *Muslim Women: My Headscarf is Not a Threat*, CNN, Aug. 21, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/08/21/hijab.godswarriors/index.html>.

²⁴ *Id.*

ARABS AMERICANS AS FOREIGNERS

When people hear “Arab American,” they immediately think of foreigners. Even though I was born in this country, people constantly make assumptions about me and my family. Being Arab means being Muslim, and many are shocked that it is possible to be both an Arab and a Christian. After thirty years of living in this country, my parents still experience a lot of discrimination. They are forever branded as foreigners. I have experienced numerous racist comments due to the fact that my parents were not born in this country—from crude jokes about my parents being terrorists to seemingly innocent questions, such as “Do your parents speak English?”

A couple of years ago, my father was called to be an expert witness in a malpractice suit. During cross-examination, the lawyer alluded to the fact that my father, an accomplished surgeon and American citizen, may have difficulty with English because he was born in Lebanon. I found it appalling that simply because he is foreign born, English is automatically too difficult for him to comprehend. The reality is quite different: my father speaks English better than a lot of Americans born in this country, as well as being fluent in both French and Arabic.

ARABS AS “OTHER”

My struggle with race subjected me and my family not only to racism but also to moments of utter confusion. The average person does not spend more than a couple of seconds deciding which box to check on surveys, while for me this is sometimes the hardest question on an exam or application. I find myself staring at “White” and “Other” trying to make myself fit within one of these categories. When filling out applications, a number of people advised me that checking off “Other” would entitle me to receive affirmative action benefits. I never felt completely white, but I did not know what “Other” entailed. If I made the choice to check off “Other,” there is often a line to distinguish my “Other” status. This led to another dilemma in deciding whether I consider myself to be Middle Eastern, Arab, or Lebanese. Apparently, I was not the only person struggling with these surveys as there was a movement to add a separate racial category to the United States Census. Some Arab Americans want to be separated into their own category, the same way that Hispanics,

Blacks, and Asians have been.²⁵ Doing this would allow the government to determine whether there are any issues targeting this minority group in order to better understand the life of Arabs living in the United States. The fact that Arabs are grouped into the “White” category means that the government is ignorant to any problems Arab Americans are facing, leaving us without any governmental benefits that other minority groups are often awarded.

After September 11th, and during the current “War on Terrorism,” this movement was all but lost due to the fact that many Arab Americans feared distinguishing themselves from Caucasians.²⁶ Since September 11th, many Americans have a fear or hatred for anything Arab or Muslim, and as a member of the Arab community, I am not ignorant to this. There is a fear of being questioned, accused of committing terrorist acts, or being a target of discrimination. The goal is no longer to separate ourselves because allowing others to make a distinction between white and Arab at a time like this seems counter-productive. The feeling is that to add this new category would do more harm than good. Our alleged “whiteness” allows us to go unnoticed and try to assimilate in hopes that tension towards the Arab community will soon disappear.

CONCLUSION

Prior to taking *Race and the Law*, if someone had asked me how my race has affected me throughout my lifetime, you can be sure my response would have been completely different. My paper would have been written from the point of view of a white person because to write otherwise would mean I was not white. *Race and the Law* opened my eyes to the history of discrimination and exclusion Arab Americans have faced. For years, I was ignorant of the fact that being an Arab American shaped and molded me in a number of different ways. I can try to pretend that my days of wanting to be white are over, but highlighting my hair, avoiding the sun, and covering any darkness on my face tells a different story. In America, whiteness is thrust upon all

²⁵ Allied Media Corp., *The Question of Race and the U.S. Census*, <http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/census.html> (last visited Nov. 10, 2008).

²⁶ “Among the major oppositions to data classification is the potential for abuse by government or law enforcement agencies, especially in times of crisis,” says Helen Samhan, executive director of the Arab American Institute Foundation. *Id.*

minorities and to be non-white is to be inferior. In the end, I have begun to accept and embrace my “not-quite-whiteness.” The struggle that remains is for others to do the same.