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## **Thank God I'm White**

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To the white Londoner couple who put trash on my table while I was getting my coffee,<sup>1</sup> the white man in the fancy suit who elbowed me for speaking Arabic on the phone, and the white teenager in the Adidas jogger who screamed while I was walking slowly looking at a map: “go get lost in another country.” To the old white lady in the fancy dress and hat who refused to let me help her with the heavy bags, just because the rolling of my R’s was too strong when I asked: “Do you need help carrying these bags upstairs ma’am?” And to the Indian cashier who chats with me every morning about his country and mine and what the white did to both of them, the Haitian cleaning lady who lets me listen to her small radio while waiting for the bus, the Asian bus driver who smiles back when I hop in, and the black security guard at my university who is never tired of having the same conversation with me every morning: “Hi sir, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m good young lady, and yourself?”

“I’m good, so tired though.”

“Yeah, well you do what you gotta do. Library?”

“Of course, have a good one sir.”

“You too dear, you too.”

To all of you, thanks.

I’m imagining many white people cringing to this, whispering the word black, pretending not to see the four whites before it, trying to roll their R’s, and wondering if they ever smiled to a bus driver. Most likely trying to remember how any of the university’s security staff looked like. It is fine, I realize my words sound patronizing, condescending, and a load of bollocks as the British would put it. I imagine their reactions, shock, and accusations, calling me many names. “Racist” though will not be one of them. For whites are trained not to see it, hear it, or comprehend it. They don’t know what it means to the point it is very surprising the term “racism” still figures in their dictionary. Whites will not dare call me racist for noticing race and speaking of it without having to whisper and mouth the words like they do. The *hush* term is embedded invisibly in their spinal cords, systemizing their movements, while they’re oblivious to it, just like oxygen. They will be calling me a lot of names, but racist won’t be one of them, simply because I’m “white-passing” as the Lebanese Canadian girl in my gender theory class puts it, and that makes me immune to the word. White people will not call me racist because just like them, I now have privilege determined by my melanin’s level. Only when my R’s are in hiding, only when I’m silent, I look white, and manage to experience the privilege of passing. I’m “lucky” to be white-passing; it confuses the living intersectionality<sup>2</sup> out of them.

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<sup>1</sup> The couple moved their trash to my table while I was walking to get my coffee from the cashier, and speaking on the phone to my mother in Arabic. When I came back I asked them to move the trash away. The woman looked at me; they both ignored me and continued talking. As a result, I spilt my coffee on their table and stuff, and went ahead to clean mine. They tried having the cashier – who was a Pakistani man – kick me out using racial slurs. He refused and asked them to leave; they gathered their stuff and left.

<sup>2</sup> Intersectional theory is a term first coined in 1989 by American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.

Unlike many people of colour in Great Britain, I only experience racism when I speak, when I roll my R's on purpose, when my body chooses to exist and identify in the grey area of accents, the non-American, non-British ones. Only then does the landlady's "Hi darling, how can I help you?" turns into: "No, I don't rent rooms to Arabs," and the white service girl at the department store becomes oblivious to my existence. Her "Give me a second dear" becomes "We don't have it in your size, get it from elsewhere," walking away while my words trace the back of her head in the chaotic silence of Boxing Day.

I have been in London for the past four months, doing my postgraduate degree in Gender Studies with Special Reference to the Middle East, oh the irony. I keep wondering, why do they make us read theories by white people writing about other white people, or "primitive" brown people? Why do they make us read texts designed for brown people who are trying hard to seek the approval of the white academia? Why do I have to read Judith Butler, a first prize winner of the Bad Writing Contest? The writer who is considered amongst the 10 smartest people on the planet, and what use is that, when only 9 other people understand her "language crimes?"<sup>3</sup> Why does she use the most complicated terms to create a discourse? Why can't you write like this, Butler? For a non-academic, non-American audience? After all, you are writing for us, struggling people of performative colour, race, and gender. People who never heard of the "American dream" you are living. People like me, who learned English on their own, because the British colonization sold my identity, and left me with the bare minimum of expressions; just enough words not to starve to death, but never enough to ask questions, never enough to formulate a good argument, write an academic essay that satisfies the British taught graders, or talk back to the white people who can't handle the sound of my R's. I am positive that you know that "Languages are flags of allegiance."<sup>4</sup> So how does your flag fly?

I have been trying to develop an immune system to what I see here. Instead, I am writing this as a tribute to the white couple who put the trash on my table. Specifically and ironically, on top of Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*. I'm writing this after eight hours of reading about and trying to understand intersectionality. This term being overly misused by white tongues is making me angrier than "liberal" feminists calling out to "free the nipple" because their nipples had had enough, while ours didn't yet. "Liberal" feminists carrying their superiority and saviour complex, and approaching us with abstract ideas of liberation; always out of context and full of infringement.

Intersectionality in the fantasy world of the whites is a dream to merge all oppressions together and fight like one. A term that was coined by a Black woman who was sick of the white law, a term some white people are abusing right now to defend gender, race, class, and sexuality altogether. The whites' intersectionality is a slogan that says: "the woman is the new nigger."<sup>5</sup> A placard held by a white topless girl in a New York slut walk protest. In an attempt to show the world that women are being treated like "niggers," she dehumanized an entire race, an entire history of slavery, minimized the ongoing struggle

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.denisdutton.com/bad\\_writing.htm](http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Rajagopalan, Kanavillil. "The Politics of Language and the Concept of Linguistic Identity." *Cause* 24 (2001): 17-28. 17.

<sup>5</sup> <http://testdb.msmagazine.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/slutwalk-race.jpg>

against racism, and referred to blacks as “niggers” just to prove a point that could have been proven instead with the slogan: “Stop being patriarchal assholes.” And yet, I remain deemed inferior, a prisoner of my R’s, under suspicion, and looked down upon for the Arabic words that slip my tongue in a conversation. She, on the other hand, remains the face of a woman’s freedom march, after ranking an entire oppression despite what slipped her tongue.

In order to understand intersectionality, I had to read Edward Said three times in Arabic, twice in English, wrestle with Crenshaw’s coinage of the term, translate Abbey Volcano’s entire anarchist intersectional approach, and struggle with Eve Mitchell’s “Marxist feminist critiques.” It dawned on me that reading Said here, in London, was different, as everything accumulated to realizing just now who was the Other he kept talking about. Until now, I had not recognized I was it: the Other they Othered, and are trying to Other again. In London, I became the subsided subaltern, and white intersectionality took another shape, another definition, and colour; now I began to see it as another form of orientalism, colonizing, and oppressing the Other. Now I understand that we are still living within Spivak’s “White men are saving brown women from brown men,”<sup>6</sup> and it became the new white definition of intersectionality. White intersectionality as appropriated by white tongues.

Therefore, in a nutshell, white intersectionality as I understood, experienced, and survived it here, is about many whites looking down on us, “the Others” for being a bit different, for carrying the shades of millennium earthly rocks on our faces, not having straight hair, and eyes the colour of an entire universe, for needing a bit more time to finish reading a sentence in English, for asking a bit too many questions in class, or not saying a word when the sense of alienation became too overwhelming for us.

White intersectionality is white people looking down on me for asking what identity politics means; for not understanding the term identity, and flinching every time I hear the word politics. White intersectionality is them feeling proud for asking what a refugee camp means, for knowing how to locate Palestine on the map, for believing they just pronounced an Arabic syllable correctly. Intersectionality to them is a fight between whites and capitalism, to amend the souls they enslaved, the countries they sold, the ones they are still selling and stealing. White intersectionality is seeing Angelina Jolie as a role model for helping the blacks, for crying when she cries, but failing to see the African children she’s feeding; being grateful to her, while oblivious to what went wrong in Africa in the first place. White intersectionality is feeling guilty for your history, but not doing anything about it.

White intersectionality here, in London, is white girls sitting around me in class, using a terminology too foreign for my tongue, and giving me promising pitiful looks that they’ll guide me to emancipation soon. Telling me that “the post-modern, neo-liberal, anti-racism movements” are my new candy. White intersectionality is also me sitting in a box at Heathrow Airport for six hours because I looked whiter than my passport, because the immigration office could not hold the weight of a tiny freckle faced girl, carrying a

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<sup>6</sup> Spivak, Gayatri C. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993). 93

Palestinian passport, born in Gaza, and granted a scholarship to study in the UK; it all seemed too unnatural to them: I was too white for my origins, but too dark for my achievements. But again, white intersectionality could also be having coffee with a white girl who has at least two nationalities, and hearing about her family vacation to Tanzania that one Christmas, having to swallow the sympathy in her voice while showing me photos of black kids smiling to her camera, thinking to myself: It is not worth getting expelled for.

I can't sit in the classroom without fidgeting in my place, resisting the urge to run screaming through the door. I can't stop myself from having nightmares about white people trying to pull me out of holes and hug me, trying to cover my freckles with snowflakes, asking me with various tones of sincerity and concern if I am safe going out at night in Palestine, if it is safe for a girl to drive, if I was ever forced to wear a veil, if I can talk, express, cry, and wail, if I want to join the just forces of emancipation. I wake up covered in sweat to the sound of traffic helicopters taking me back to other kinds of helicopters that other white people own in my own country; a story for another time.

I go to classes, I can't hide the traces of last night's nightmare from my facial expressions anymore, and I'm tired of having to listen to the same excuses every single time: "Sorry we didn't know, media is such a sham, delivering wrong information about your people all the time, you know." I try to bite my tongue, but my answer slips in the country of utter democracy and "epistemological" freedom: "Well, ignorance is bliss, and you guys are *hella* blessed." You think I come from a desert where men ride camels, live in tents, and bury girls alive, but for some reason are still shocked when you see how familiar I am with my history and yours. I know the triple failures of your feminist waves, your stream of consciousness because you never get tired of "expressing yourselves in a politically correct way," and I know your ignorance, I know your ignorance because I was never blissed, not for a split second since I was born.

I go to classes, and I witness the same aggressive tones, the negative competitiveness, and I'm scared of having to answer the same question every single time: "How do you speak such good English?" and I could only think of one response, "Well, I *dunno* 200 years of colonialism and Eurocentric education, how do you know so little history?"<sup>7</sup> I came here four months ago, wanting to learn about gender in an academic atmosphere, then go back Palestine and teach it; simple dreams for us simple primitive people. I sincerely thought I chose the best country, and the best place to learn what I was passionate about the most; my womanhood. Ironically, I will leave with less knowledge than when I arrived, I will leave it with more hatred towards supremacy – a word that I learned recently and is apparently equivalent to racism, with disrespect to the blatant theories that are being shoved down our throats without a single implementation in reality. I will go back to teach many things, none of them will be white, none of them on passing as white, checking your privilege, appropriating a culture, or having to even sit through another discussion on "reverse racism." I will tell stories about these uncanny concepts, and students will scratch their heads and look around frightened, I will tell them not to be; that my white saviours lost me on the way back home because the road was too long and too dark for the pale.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/pjux/status/644971803354513408>

I will ask them to run for their lives if they hear “soy caramel cow milk vegetarian gluten free coffee latte” made with love. I will ask them to scream their identity<sup>8</sup> proudly, not to look over their shoulders once they hear the word politics,<sup>9</sup> to still smile victoriously to the white NGOs employee who just walked into the coffee shop. If I ever get to teach I will tell my students to stop reading, to stop trying to understand what the white world wants from us, how it sees, and categorizes us. I will talk to them about themselves, hear them speak of themselves, know what makes them who they are, away from the previously presumed constructions, ask them to leave the classroom, look out and within, find binaries, dichotomies, and boundaries, and smash them altogether.

We will revisit our medieval poems, and rejoice in the historical progressive verse,<sup>10</sup> in the agency women had, the Eros present in our past instead of the death in our present. I will tell my students that there’s no such thing as a failed generation, but there’s indeed a failed education; one that deprived us of our knowledge and history. I will tell them that Mashrou’ Leila’s “endorsement of gender equality”<sup>11</sup> and the sexual orientation of their lead singer were considered valid reasons for Jordan to ban them forever. I will talk to them about their own gender, and bodies; teach them to love the bits that are covered, the ones that are not, and to fight for either, and both. I will show pink and blue that green might be better, that any colour can be another way to see ourselves and the world.

I will tell about masculinities that are neither limited by our eastern masculine shackles, nor determined by western demonization of brown men. I will assure them that we will defend each other and stand with each other, and we will learn hope from our smiles that never vanish no matter how Othered we become. I will tell them what they already know; don’t worry, white people will never come to save us, they can’t even save themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> In light of the general refusal of identity politics, the notion of “identity” in the Palestinian context is majorly threatened by settler colonialism, hence the need and emphasis on preserving it remains present.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the constant censorship from the Palestinian and Israeli Authorities on our freedom of speech, the prosecution of activists, academics, and journalists, in addition to banning entire information sources, the topic of politics became more distressful and dangerous to discuss even in informal setting.

<sup>10</sup> Amer, Sahar. “Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (2009): 215-236.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36148343>