

## Outside the Looking Glass

To whom it may concern,

Professor Junot Diaz has a famous quote: *There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought it isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, [...] deny them any reflection of themselves.*"

In our own ways, each of us can find ourselves in environments where we have no reflection-- either because we look different, or because we can't speak the language, or because we are missing that peculiar mark that culture draws on us. Like having arms and legs, having cultural identity is necessary for moving about or interacting with the world. Lacking these components feels like a deformity. It is a deformity you cannot describe to people, and one they don't immediately see.

In my case, beyond having no reflection, I do not even have a face. We are tagged and labeled by our combinations of features: almond eyes, flat noses, dark irises, light hair, shades of skin. Our features, like letters, create words: Caucasian, American, Chinese, *boriqua*, latina, black, white, european, WASP, African. There are many combinations of these, in many different tones, from neutral, to derogatory, to admiring.

My features create nonsense. When people look at me, they do not parse anything meaningful, and this causes frustration and confusion. Yet at the same time, when I try to explain, they can't seem to understand, precisely because the confusion is all they see. It's like placing someone in front of a wall and asking them for the shape of the house. They look too close, and this makes them far away.

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Three generations ago, there was a farmer living in the highlands of Ethiopia, a place called Kafa. He grew crops: coffee, corn, and wheat. He had many cattle and sheep. Most importantly, he grew two daughters and three sons. He divided his land in his old age among his sons, who divided their land among theirs, until the last son passed the land to his daughter. The last son was a peculiar man for those times, who took on an Italian name: Balambras Karlo. He was respected yet somewhat eccentric; he could pray in Latin; he sent daughters to school.

At about the same time, there was an art forger living in Shanghai, China. He forged art for a living. He was skilled at varnishing paintings, so skilled that when he varnished and backed the ink paintings, he could delicately peel off a layer of his wax in a perfect, unblemished sheet. On that sheet would be an exact ghost of the painting itself, which he backed with a different canvas, touched up, painted over, and sold. He forged many paintings, but the money would be lost to his opium addiction, which in turn deteriorated his health and skill. Fortunately, he also grew something, just like the farmer did: four daughters and two sons.

They would never meet.

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I am fortunate enough to say that my life began with joy. In a small home on Forest St. in Denver, Colorado, U.S.A, the great granddaughter of an art forger and the great grandson of a farmer would have two children, myself and my brother. My father was sure to always impress upon me that this was a miracle, this joy.

We went often to our parents' homelands at a very young age, and later I would wonder whether this was a blessing or a curse. At least at that time, it was a blessing. It made me a talkative child, maybe because I felt I had to say everything a different way to everyone, since I would talk to my mother in Shanghainese and Mandarin and English, and my aunts and uncles would praise us if we spoke in Amharic or Kafa No'no.

When we would go, to Shanghai or to Kafa, it was always running and racing and playing and jumping everywhere. I didn't pay attention then to the people; instead I looked at busy streets or quiet gardens and jade sculptures, at cattle and coffee plants and rivers. I was preoccupied, and did not pay attention to how people looked at us in all of those places, my brother and I, with confusion or sometimes disgust.

The curse came later, when I would grow up feeling like part of everything, yet at the same time, nothing. As I grew out of the critical period for language and started school, my Shanghainese was lost, my Mandarin was injured severely. Kafa No'no I learned to speak fluently as a teenager, purely out of love and determination. A language with fewer than one million speakers, there was no other way. I started to see the difference in the way people looked at us. Sometimes it was subtle, the way we were handed forks in restaurants, the way people were startled if we spoke to them in their language. Sometimes it was loud: literal shouting, from people on the street. "Foreigner" in many languages: *ferenge*, 外国人。 Yet I felt I wasn't a foreigner; I grew up there, in month-long trips to see family.

This was the curse: that the blessing of cultural pride and exposure led to more dissonance than submitting to assimilation may have.

Lest you think America, diverse and tolerant, was exempt: once walking in Central Square, I was shouted at here too, asked over and over again, ridiculous questions:

*"Cape Verdean?"*

*"Hawaiian?"*

*"Haitian?"*

*"Damn!"*

*“What are you?”*

*“What are you?”*

*“What are you?”*

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In high school and college, when everyone else was finding themselves I found myself fighting to have others see me as I am.

*“So, like, what made you want to join the Chinese Students’ Club?”*

For some reason hair seemed to be a defining factor: straight and I was a model minority, curly and I was an affirmative action admit. I lost joy, I was no longer angry, I was merely exhausted. It was exhausting, to feel that I had to find ways to declare myself, to find the opening to insert an anecdote (*“when my mother lived in Nanjing...”*), to lose the small, kind nepotisms that immigrants allow each other, like a free drink when the cashier sees your face. All because of this facelessness: to feel not a part of anything. It was always unseen or misinterpreted.

These feelings of outsidersness were small but constant, a thousand a day. There were worse ones, maybe once per year. My brother was refused a car ride, because a suburban mother was worried he, a barely 4-foot sixth grader, might “hurt someone”. If I rose my voice I was laughed off, told the black woman had been brought out in me. A group of girls stood up and left when I sat at their table. America expresses its hatred purest in children, raw and unsuppressed; that’s why school is traumatic.

I struggled purely with the facts of myself, with choosing to display them or not. I expended so much energy to publicly announce my proper visual assignments, enduring speaking the broken Mandarin, pressing desperately with cultural references so I could get them to see: *I am one of you.*

At one point, I lost all my energy this way. I spent days in bed, not moving or thinking, willing myself into nonexistence, a monster that should never have been.

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I am many things. I always have been, but only later would I recognize the wealth that was given to me. I have ruralness, *ye getera lij*; I have the deepest countryside, where I herded cattle and lit darkness with solar-powered flashlights. Yet also, my ancestors laid the foundation for the largest city in the world.

I wanted--I *want*--people to look beyond just faces. I want people to look for the details that make a person, like isn't funny that great grandpa forged artwork, and wasn't it tragic he succumbed to British opium. Isn't it disappointing that our tea plantations were taken--*can you imagine the price, in Shanghai, today?!!*--and grandfather worked as an engineer in a factory. Isn't it inspiring that grandmother worked there too, climbing out from opiate poverty, senior to all the linemen. Wars long ended are still fought in my soul, with the screams of what could have been.

Isn't it beautiful, our coffee plants, isn't it sad, the disappearance of the deer and lions and white-striped monkeys. This is an age where living as human beings were meant to, given what's needed by cycles of nature and God, is considered "*poverty*": we are rich, indeed.

There is so *much*. I have learned to carry it all. I have learned to stay loud instead of silent.

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To Whom It May Concern,

There is no clear way to say this; and I have said it poorly. I say it poorly each time. I am outside the shaded looking glass, looking at you, you who live in this world of visual tribes and affiliations, you who cannot see me, I who live alone, outside, looking in.

I am trying to show you something, but we are blind to each other, so all I have to give you are words. Disjointed thoughts. I shout them to you, and I only hope you can understand, a little bit, by listening. I shout them to you, because others like me don't shout them enough. I shout them to you. Hear me. I am not nothing. I am here.

I am one of you.