

Identity and Belonging

The Perspective of a Brazilian Jewish Woman

Carolina Ruhman Sandler

Johns Hopkins University

“It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call ‘the land of the barbarians.’” – Edward W. Said.¹

“You don’t look Jewish to me; look at your nose!” I have heard multiple times in my life. I have light skin, dark hair, and a small nose that seems to be constantly laughing at such an idea.

Until 9th grade, I studied at the Jewish school my father had attended and where my grandmother taught. I would spend my weekends at a Jewish club and go to an unofficial Jewish summer camp every holiday. Even though I lived in a majority Catholic country, in a city with more than 10 million inhabitants, everywhere I looked, I saw what I later heard described as a Jewish face. It was like living in a ghetto with an invisible wall, I would soon find out.

Everything changed when I went to high school. At 14 years old, my parents decided it was time to broaden my horizons and moved me to a Catholic school where I felt, for the first time, like a minority. Nobody had heard about the *bar* and *bat mitzvah* parties. Instead, the debutants were *the* thing—and I had no idea what they meant.

I had obviously heard the joke of the Jewish nose—and even had a couple of friends who had bigger noses than average. But

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1979).

that was more of a parody than a portrait of reality. At first, when I started to hear about the Jewish looks at my new school, I thought my friends were misunderstanding the quip, but I soon realized that the big nose was a fact of life for them.

It took me a while to grasp that there was an undercurrent of prejudice—it was as if I was lucky not to parade a big, Jewish nose. I could proceed disguised throughout my life, everyone around me oblivious to my true identity. A dermatologist even told me once: your nose is your asset.

I didn't think much about the notion of the Jewish look until I went to work in Singapore for a semester. There, I read Lee Kuan Yew's autobiography.² The book contained a surprising revelation. In 1965, right after the country's independence, Lee quickly realized that he would need to build a strong army and would not be able to count on British help, as its former colonizer had done with neighboring Malaysia. He recounts in the book that he tried to approach other countries for assistance, such as India and Egypt, but there was no answer. Then, he looked for Israel, whose founders decided to support Singapore's army.

They sent a small group of officers to help establish the Singaporean Forces four months after independence. Their presence had to be confidential to avoid being seen as a provocation by Muslims in Malaysia and Singapore. This was less than twenty years after the creation of Israel, so tensions were high. How could they hide a group of twenty Israelis in plain sight? "To disguise their presence, we called them 'Mexicans.' They looked swarthy enough," wrote Lee.

There it was: another interpretation of the looks of a Jew. Then I saw that, in the eyes of Lee, Mexicans and Jews had the same looks. Where one has no clue about the origins of a person, it is easy to speculate and generate a new set of stereotypes. In Singapore in the 1960s, a Jew could pass as a Mexican.

It became clear to me that there was no "Jewish look." I could also look back at my experience as an exchange student in Paris, where my classmates were surprised to learn that I was Brazilian. "You don't look Brazilian!" they would exclaim. I quickly understood that Brazilian meant Black.

Edward W. Said talks about "the land of the barbarians" in his book *Orientalism* as a way of belittling the ones who are different

² Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: Singapore and the Asian Economic Boom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

and creating an arbitrary, fictional separation between “Us” and “Others.”

I am a barbarian. I live in the land of women, inhabited by these mysterious beings equipped with a uterus, and no one can understand what they really want. I am reminded that many men claim that it is impossible to know what women want. As if we were monoliths, as if we were all the same.

I also belong to the land of Jews, those mystical people with big noses claiming to be the chosen people, masters of usury, killers of Christ, greedy and fat with all the world’s riches.

My land is also Brazil, seen as it would be the land of easy women who love to dance naked and make love, where Carnival lasts all year; the eternal country of the future. The present never arrives for us, and we are doomed to wait for a brighter, more prosperous tomorrow that never comes. I made up a language with my Brazilian friends in Europe for when we were approached by men. If they knew where we came from, their hands would reach for improper places at the speed of light.

The life of a barbarian is a lonely one. It is confined to the places where our fictions limit us. We are so much more than these labels and how they turn clichés into expectations. To break free, we would have to outgrow them and realize collectively that we are all barbarians.

* * *

“We are prisoners of images, of representations..., and only those who...choose to rid themselves of their lives (if such a thing is actually possible) can reach the other” —Mathias Énard³

In the halls of my Jewish middle school, one question was repeated over and over: do you consider yourself to be more Jewish or Brazilian? It was not something our teachers brought to us in an institutionalized way to force the students’ sense of self. Instead, the children themselves wanted to know about each other’s identities and belonging. When it really matters, are you Jewish or Brazilian?

It was a trick question for a ten-year-old. If I answered I was Brazilian, I would be reverting to the default, the label on my birth

³ Mathias Énard, *Compass*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: New Directions, 2018).

certificate. Because I was born in Brazil, the answer would be pretty straightforward. However, if I said that, the other kids would feel that I did not relate to Judaism as well as they did.

I did not want to be a lesser Jew. Answering that I was more Jewish than Brazilian would put me in the contrarian group—which, paradoxically, was the larger one. It meant that my sense of identity was greater and more complex than my documents stated. I was the Other, the one who did not belong to my country and was more significant than myself.

I could not answer that I was both. Someone inevitably would go to the extreme and ask: if there was a war between Israel and Brazil, for whom would you fight? Where does your compass point? They seemed to wonder.

It would take me years to understand that I did not need to reduce myself to one or the other to oblige the wish of others. Brazil is the land that welcomed my family at a time when they were not accepted anywhere else. Here we were able to settle and thrive. Here is my home; it is where I belong. It is something interesting: I am a second-generation Brazilian, but I feel strong roots here. If I were to live anywhere else, as I have for short periods of time, I imagine I would always feel foreign.

At the same time, I also have a deep connection to my religion. These are my people; this is my community. My blood and my story mean that I will always be welcomed among them. My compass points inward, where I try to reconcile all the stories, labels, identities, experiences, and projections.

It is not an easy task to do. That is why I now believe we would ask of each other when we were kids, “What are you?” The answer represents the self to others—maybe even helps the one who asks to define him or herself.

As I read and looked for answers, I understood that how we portray one another in books and films is one of the means we use to establish these sets of identities. Literature can be used to stereotype and reduce one’s humanity or to create empathy and connection to the other. The difference is up to the writer of the story.

When we allow ourselves to read and learn about those who are different from us, we are presented with a unique opportunity to see and understand them. Literature allows the author to speak of their world, it gives them the tool to build a bridge to the reader, where they will be able to show them their reality and values. It is an experience that creates empathy.

It is the reader's job to remind oneself that one voice is merely that: one voice. There must be present a vital and proactive wish to see and hear the other before we begin to read and write. That is the only way we can attempt to understand others and, by extension, ourselves and our own multitudes.

* * *

"She resented the fact that her veil, which to her was a symbol of her sacred relationship to God, had now become an instrument of power, turning the women who wore them into political signs and symbols." — Azar Nafisi⁴

When I was 15, I took a trip with my parents and my brother to Israel. It was a celebration of his *bar mitzvah*. It was July, the temperatures were scorching, and the sun was relentless. We went to see all the tourist spots; we didn't want to miss anything.

My parents had arranged a small prayer to be held to celebrate the *bar mitzvah boy* at the Western Wall in Jerusalem (the official ceremony would happen a month later in our São Paulo, Brazil, synagogue). We all dressed appropriately: the men with their suits and my mother and me with our long skirts and sleeves.

The Wall was everything I had hoped it would be. Gigantic, it seemed to shine on its own as it reflected the sunlight. It felt sacred. We placed our prayers; each one put a small piece of paper with a wish written into its cracks. It was overflowing with papers. Women dressed in black would shout, and men would chant, and it was pure magic.

After that, it was time to see all that was possible of the Holy City. My parents hired a tourist guide and he quickly took us to the Dome of the Rock entrance. The Islamic Shrine is famous for its gold-plated roof resting right above the Second Jewish Temple. It looked beautiful on the outside.

My mother and I were stopped when it was time to go in. We had to put on a veil to enter the shrine. I was handed a black veil and watched my mother put hers on effortlessly. But I just couldn't. I started protesting, blamed the sun and the heat, and, out of nowhere, began to cry. I couldn't understand my reaction to it—it felt too visceral even for the dramatic teenager that I was.

⁴ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tebran* (New York: Random House, 2003, 2008).

My parents were dismayed and angry. They were also hot, they said, but I had to wear the veil if I wanted to go in. Eventually, they went, and I stayed outside, waiting. When they finally left, I had already recomposed myself, and then we went to other sights. My father was still mad at me, but I was already excited to see the Machaneh Yehuda Market and didn't want to think again of what had just happened.

More than twenty years have passed, and the first time I ever stopped to think about that day was when I started to read Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tebran*. Her resistance to wearing the veil struck a chord within me. I was just like her; I would not be forced to do it. Our punishments were obviously asymmetrical. I didn't get to enter the magnificent Dome of the Rock, whereas to Nafisi, it meant a risk to her career and life. However, the protest felt the same.

When I started thinking about my refusal, my reasons became clearer. The veil symbolized oppression, and women seemed to disappear under it. They became invisible, interchangeable; they seemed passive and submissive.

But that was only a part of the equation. It took me a while to understand how the veil was also the symbol of the enemy. When that trip took place, I had just left my Jewish school, where I had studied my whole life until then. The mood there was Zionist. Whenever a terrorist attack happened in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, a teacher would bring an Israeli newspaper clipping with the complete story to the class.

This was two years before the attacks of September 11th, 2001, and the worst that could typically happen in an attack was a suicide bomber on a school bus. Every news clipping would send a shiver down my spine and cause me nightmares. And, after everything I had seen and felt, my parents wanted me to wear the veil?

It was then that my own prejudice became clear to me. As a 15-year-old, I equated the veil to terrorism and oppression. As a 38-year-old woman, I was starting to understand how much prejudice was ingrained within me, and it would take a while to deconstruct those damning generalizations.

I started to look for stories of women who understood the veil differently. I saw how the veil, once a symbol of a woman's relationship with God, had been politicized. When it is not enforced by law in Islamic Republics, it is not perceived by them as an oppressive custom. It is a personal choice.

What I was lacking was the ability to talk to and learn with those women who see the veil differently, those who chose to wear

it. The power of literature is that it provides us the means to do so and find new perceptions of what once were ingrained prejudices. It is never too late to start.

* * *

“I was not immune to the power of that shimmering fiction that any citizen of an oppressive and aggressive nationalistic country will understand only too well: the magical unity conjured by the word we.”—Orhan Pamuk⁵

I was eleven when it happened. I remember so clearly the Jewish school’s yellow and blue halls, the students with their white and blue uniforms, the colorful backpacks. Yitzhak Rabin, Israel’s prime minister, and a hero to many had just been shot and murdered.

“Those bloody Arabs!” Someone shouted.

It’s not that we were especially interested in Israeli politics; rather, we were all girl and boy fans of Rabin, the man who had signed the peace agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Even from Brazil, we knew he was closer than ever to real peace in Israel, our promised land.

We were young and lived far from Israel, but we knew little about Israeli history. Earlier that year, we had all interviewed our grandparents for a school project. Many of us returned to school to present to our friends and teachers the story of how many in our families had been murdered during the Holocaust. Israel was our safe haven, and the brave Israeli population had been fending off Arab attacks and wars. They were the targets of terrorist attacks on buses and streets and yet managed to prevail.

When Rabin has his historical handshake with PLO’s leader, Yasser Arafat, we knew—as all kids have a way of knowing things with absolute certainty—that true peace was only a matter of time. Now, the dream was over in a matter of minutes. Rabin was dead, and the peace agreement was over.

Some girls started crying, and I rushed home, feeling defeated. That was 1995, so the only way for an eleven-year-old to understand what was happening in the world back then was to wait for the evening news. I remember watching it with my mom when

⁵ Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

I discovered it wasn't a "bloody Arab's" fault. The assassin was an Israeli ultranationalist named Yigal Amir.

The world seemed to tilt and flip in a way I had not known could be possible. How could this be? The murderer was one of us.

My understanding of the meaning of it all came in waves. First, I realized that a part of what I once thought of as a coherent group, *our* group, could be on the wrong side of history. There wasn't a clear line dividing the good and the bad guys anymore. The world was made of shadows that I had just started to perceive.

Then, it became clear that the entity I called *we* was not something uniform and crystalline. Deep divisions among us could stop a country and revert what I had until then thought of as the wheel of history: always moving forward toward progress and peace.

If I had lived in Israel, I would have witnessed those divisions in the rallies and protests against Rabin. I would have seen in the newspapers those who carried posters picturing Rabin wearing Nazi uniforms. Those men, women, and children believed that Rabin was giving up occupied territories and capitulating to the enemy. I would have understood that the Oslo agreements were not unanimous in Israel. But what could I know back then? When we view things from the outside, superficially, it is easy to bestow them with a sense of uniformity in what is anything but that.

Finally, it hit me: I had blamed those who were innocent in that instance. The enemy, in this case, was living among us. As any child can attest, unfairness is one of the greatest sins. "That's not fair!" we cry when our mother scolds us for the wrongdoings of our siblings. However, that was precisely what I had done in that case.

It was impossible not to blame the "bloody Arabs" initially. They were the enemy; they had planted bombs on school buses; they had attacked Israel in the middle of Yom Kippur, the holiest of our holy days. They were vicious, they were mean, and they would do anything to erase Israel from the map. If tragedy had fallen, it was sure to be their fault.

The situation seemed to repeat itself, like so many times history does, when the Twin Towers fell in 2001. This time I was at my Catholic high school auditorium when I heard someone shout: "Those bloody Arabs!"

A chill ran down my spine as I had heard that scream before. This time, I waited for the TV and the internet to confirm the identity of the attack's masterminds. When Osama bin Laden's name was confirmed, I felt the relief that one feels when their worst nightmares find their way to reality. It was as if I could be

relieved of the weight of my prejudices because, in that case, they were true.

But the seed was already planted. I already knew better than to fully believe in the “us versus them” mentality that everyone else seemed to embrace. When the atrocities of Guantánamo surfaced in the news, there was a piece of me that already knew the terror that comes when atrocities are committed by one of us.

The danger lies in the over-identification with a group that is only a piece of fiction. When we gather people under the banner of religion or nationality, all sorts of nuances and complexities are bound to be excluded from this imagined identity. All bad traits are given to the Other, while We remain pure and true. However, all we need is a closer and honest look inside and around us to realize that nothing is ever as clear as it is supposed to be.

* * *

“The core concepts that shape the image of the Jew’ are the age-old ones: the Jew as oriental and foreign and the victim of oppression; the Jew’ as cosmopolitan and successful.”—Sander L. Gilman⁶

Growing up Jewish, one slowly but surely learns how to pick up the signs of anti-Semitism. The neighbor from school who threw eggs on the patio in the middle of our PE classes, or the neighbor of a friend who refused to share an elevator with “that Jew.”

We would collect these stories like cigarettes—dangerous even if we didn’t understand them completely. We knew some people didn’t like Jews but didn’t quite understand why. Things started to click when we learned about the Holocaust at school—and I built an internal radar specialized in waiting for an anti-Semitic act to cross my way.

The first time it happened, I was twelve. I worked during the summer vacations at my family’s business. It is a group of maternity and children’s clothing stores that my grandmother set up when my grandfather became ill. Her children joined her right after college, and it became a business. There, I would learn how to

⁶ Sander L. Gilman, “‘We’re Not Jews’: Imagining Jewish History and Jewish Bodies in Contemporary Multicultural Literature,” in *Orientalism and the Jews*, edited by Kalmar, Ivan Davidson, and Derek Penslar (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

fold and store the pajamas, remove the finger stains from the glass counters, and insert the price tags without damaging the clothes; how to wake up early in the middle of vacations while my friends were asleep because I had a responsibility; how it felt to earn money and belong to the adult world. It was an education.

One day, a woman came to buy a gift for her daughter. She asked to see all the bodysuits, dresses, and rompers. The salesperson tried to help her, but she didn't like anything she saw and asked for more and more. The clothes were piling on the counters, and nothing was to her liking. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she shouted: "I don't want to buy anything in this goddamn Jewish store." She stomped out of the shop, leaving all of us, especially me, in shock. So that was how it felt.

I finally had a story of my own to hold on to. Others came in, but they all happened in discreet ways, which always made me wonder: was that anti-Semitism, or was I too touchy? Either way, there was no actual conflict: I was in the comfortable position of belonging to a victimized group. We were always on the right side of things, and that prejudice only reinforced our particular situation.

When I was twenty, I studied in Paris for a year. I prided myself on having friends from all over the world, including Germans and even a Palestinian. My best friend from Brazil, a Jewish girl like me, told me she went to see a movie about the Holocaust with a German friend. By the movie's end, she said to her friend: "Isn't this amazing? A Jewish and a German watching this movie together?" But her friend didn't share her enthusiasm: "What you think is amazing I find shameful." When she told me this story, I understood: so this was how Germans felt. It made me see them with a different set of eyes; it made me lower the settings of my radar.

Right before my exchange program ended, I took a backpacking trip around Eastern Europe and my first destination was Berlin. I was the first person in my family to visit the German capital. When I told my grandparents, they were flabbergasted: what in the world was I going to do there? But I was from a different generation; I was curious. All those relatives who died in concentration camps or under the bridges of the *shtetls* were not people I knew. I decided to go.

I stayed in a hostel, made friends, and went out on city tours and to museums. The Holocaust Museum had just opened, and I saw all the horrors that happened during the War. In the evenings, I would go to small rock concerts. On my last night there, while I

waited outside the venue to open, I started talking to a German boy—he was only nineteen.

He asked me where I was from, and I told him a bit about my life in Brazil. He asked me if I liked living there, and I told him about the fine weather, the beaches, the hard-working people—the complete stereotype. Yes, I loved living in Brazil. “How about you?” I asked. “Do you like living in Germany?”

At first, he seemed unsure about how to answer that. But soon, he found a way: he straightened his arm above his head and did a *Sieg Heil* salute.

I could not believe my eyes. There I was, in Berlin—in Germany!—talking to a German boy who thought it was a nice idea to give me a Nazi salute. He didn’t even know that I was Jewish.

Blood must have disappeared from my face, for I saw that he started reacting quickly, ashamed of what he had just done. I moved to leave the place at once, but he tried to stop me. “I’m not a Nazi! I’m sorry! I don’t know why I just did that!” he said. But the damage was done.

It took me a while to process that evening. I don’t think he was anti-Semitic. To me, he just lacked the proper repertoire to state that he was proud to be German without resorting to Nazi symbolism.

I understood that part of my heritage and identity meant that I belonged to a group that had been victimized, and that I was justified if I enhanced the settings of my radar once again. The traditional interpretations about Jews placed us as victims of oppression because we were cosmopolitan and successful, according to Sander L. Gilman’s work.

Our cosmopolitanism and success were the reasons why anti-Semitism happened. It was not our fault that we had been victimized and still managed to establish ourselves successfully in the world. Every episode of anti-Semitism reinforced this position.

When you are the victim, there is no conflict about the status of your identity in the international arena. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it feels like to be on the wrong side of history. When citizens of your country have committed a crime for which a whole nation and its descendants must pay the price.

When we see a bearded Muslim man, and he becomes a terrorist instantly for us, we become criminals. When you are used to being the victim, that realization is a bitter one. Nonetheless, it is one we must embrace if we wish to end radicalization and

divisive politics. How can we do so if the Other is always the enemy?

* * *

“All my life I wanted to see, in the frame, something specific. I wanted a mirror to exist inside the frame that would reflect a precise, sharp image. I wanted to see a whole person, not a fragmented one. But that person wasn’t there. Because of my double identity I saw only fluctuation, distortion, dissimulation. I saw something hybrid, out of focus, always jumbled.”
—Jhumpa Lahiri⁷

“These are your roots,” said my mother while we walked through Bom Retiro, the old Jewish neighborhood of São Paulo. It was a sunny Thursday, and we wandered the streets alongside my grandmother. Every week, my mother and grandmother work as volunteers for an institution that provides meals for those in need. That day, I was their assistant. We had just finished our shift and we were going back to my mother’s office. She was raised and works there. That is her place. I, on the other hand, can’t walk to the famous *challah* store without opening Google Maps first.

I don’t have her ease around the neighborhood. I can’t find Sarah’s Hole, the traditional Jewish restaurant, nor walk alone to the *kosher* market. I know all the stories about Pletzale, and how that coffee place was the meeting point for so many Holocaust survivors and for the next generations as well. But if I pass it, I don’t know if there’s a table where I cannot sit, that already has its informal owners. I don’t have my own stories, my own places there. I only follow in my mother’s footsteps. I don’t belong.

I think about the distance we build from our roots. I have with the old neighborhood only an emotional connection. I love to get to know my mother’s and grandmother’s places. To hear their stories about my great-grandfather’s wagon and how he would sell ice around the city. About how the city’s Ashkenazi community would all gather in front of the old synagogue and how one could not walk when the whole street would be crowded for the Yom Kippur celebration.

⁷ Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

But my life serves as a stark contrast and a reminder: those may be my roots, but that is not my story. If my life were a movie, those scenes would belong to a prequel. I went back home with the strange feeling of not belonging to the place where my roots are.

My São Paulo is another one. It is that of the bakeries and parks, of the club's swimming pool and lunches with my friends at the mall. Of movie theaters and bars. Learning how to ride my bike at the public college campus and studying for my exams on the patio of my Catholic University—the one that was adorned with a large cross, my favorite spot for reading.

My roots are spread across the city. I carry with me those of my parents and grandparents, but they serve more as a reminder: your story also happened in these places. But my São Paulo is another city. It is every square where I would go on secret dates, on the sidewalks of all the schools I attended. My roots are also in Paris and Singapore, all the places where I have lived and loved. The old Jewish neighborhood in São Paulo is part of this rhizome, and it lives inside me somehow, but I do not belong to it.

When I moved to my Catholic high school, my family began to view me as the assimilated one. I was the only cousin who would date non-Jewish boys and have more Catholic friends than Jewish ones, the one who stopped going to the Jewish club and studied hard to get a scholarship to study abroad. At my wedding (to my Jewish husband), we asked the rabbi to explain the ceremony to our *goy* friends. When our daughters were born, we asked our best friends to be their Godparents, a tradition that our relatives did not understand.

Some of them may judge me, thinking that my roots aren't deep enough. But I am more than the sum of the parts of my identity; I am something I created myself. My roots are widespread. Jewish, woman, Brazilian: these are all labels that were given to me. But they are not all that I am.

All my life, I have felt that I did not belong to the set of identities that were bestowed on me. They didn't quite fit one with the other, and I always felt that neither represented me truly. Everywhere I went, I felt a bit like an outsider. Jewish in a Catholic country, Brazilian in a Eurocentric world, woman in a man's land.

I prefer the identity I have built throughout my life. It is constantly changing, in a state of flux that reflects my moment. I am a mother of two. I am a woman and a feminist. I am a writer, a student, and a passionate reader. I am Jewish and I was born in

Brazil, a country that I love. I belong to my family. Wherever I can read and write and be with my loved ones, I will be at home.

* * *

“Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.”—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari⁸

When I began to study identity and representation, it was inevitable to stop and turn inwards. How do I view others? How do they see me? How do I see *myself*? This was the journey I went through with these essays.

I looked at all the stereotypes and fictions that have accompanied my life. I was always demanded to fit into one or another of them, to choose which one I should be judged with. I thought about those who were different from me, those who were deemed “the enemy,” and how I viewed my own people. I analyzed the anti-Semitism that reached my shores and the way I already half expected it to come, in a perpetual self-aware mode. And finally, I thought about my roots and sense of belonging.

This was a journey that happened in writing. Something about the experience of writing allows certain ideas and thoughts to float to the surface. Writing, for me, is thinking in an active form. It is to escape the shallowness of my daily thoughts and dive in search of truths hidden within me. As Joan Didion said: “I don’t know what I think until I write it down.”

In my investigation, I found that I do have a country, and I do belong somewhere. However, that is an insufficient way to see me. I am more than my country, gender, or religion. I learned that any external source of identity is accompanied by an ensemble of fictions that have little, if any, resemblance to the truth. With my multiple identities, I find that the stereotypes would never end.

The only way, as I see it, to find the path to another’s heart is through their words. There lies the power of reading. It provides us a way to inhabit other worlds and perspectives. To be able to be a part of this tradition by writing pieces of my story and thoughts, in all their complexity and ambiguity, is nothing short of a gift to the girl who always dreamed of being a writer.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).