

Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange

Volume 2018
Issue 1 *The Shoebox Issue*

Article 11

June 2019

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Recommended Citation

Crawford, Robert (2019) "Outside the Melting Pot: Reflections on Hypervisibility Abroad," *Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange*: Vol. 2018: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/alterity/vol2018/iss1/11>

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Outside the Melting Pot: Reflections on Hypervisibility Abroad

Robert Crawford

The United States is known, perhaps more than any other country in the world, as the definition of a 'melting pot' - a place with a vast mixture of people from all different nationalities, races and walks of life. One of the most interesting aspects of studying abroad, then, is witnessing how members of other nations that do not exactly satisfy the criteria of a melting pot interact with you if they are not extremely familiar with people of your race. I felt the sensation of hypervisibility, or the feeling of sticking out like a sore thumb based on my appearance, relatively often while studying abroad in Spain, but when reflecting on this hypervisibility, it would only make sense to write about the time period immediately after my program in Madrid ended, which I spent in Eastern Europe visiting my sister. She lives in Kishinev, Moldova, and particularly when I traveled with her from Moldova to Belarus to visit fellow Americans for Thanksgiving, she told me not to be startled if we were followed by people who looked like government agents, and that these people would keep an eye on us at the very least while passing through customs at the airport - on account of the fact that we're not only Americans, but we're Black Americans - a demographic of people which citizens of Moldova and Belarus don't interact with very often. In fact, she encouraged me to leave my laptop at her house, and maybe even my phone also, since there was a good chance agents at the border might take it and do anything to it before returning it to me. With this preface, I was nervous to say the least to enter Belarus - but remembering the fact that I'm neither a spy nor an agent of any kind for the American government or any other government helped me to calm my nerves.

Belarus, however, still stands out as a time where I felt particularly seen and visible. Apparently, making eye contact in the old Soviet Union was extremely offensive, so not many

elderly people looked at me or acknowledged me at all, but younger generations seemed intrigued to say the least by not only an American but a Black American in Belarus and Moldova. On more than one occasion, people asked to take pictures with my sister and I while walking through the mall or another public place, and as young school kids pointed at me in the museum and notified their friends of my presence, I realized that I was most likely the first black person they had ever seen anywhere other than television. I got the impression while in Eastern Europe that they often see a healthy dose of Black Americans in popular culture, but they don't get the opportunity to interact with Black Americans in person that often, so I never for a moment was offended by their fascination, curiosity, or any otherwise unusual behavior showed toward me.

Given that the United States is by all accounts a melting pot and we have people from all cultures and walks of life, nothing would be likely to surprise me. With that being said, however, if I saw an alien today, I would point or stop to take a picture with it at the very least, and I probably would act much more unusual than that, so I certainly understood the reactions of people in Spain, Belarus and Moldova to my presence and my hypervisibility. And although I felt extremely seen and visible, it was still a great trip, an interesting experience, and I felt I was able to learn a great amount about other cultures just by how they chose to interact with me.