

Hybrids: Where Do They Belong?

Marhaba! This is the Arabic word for “hello everyone.” Language has always been a large part of my life and my character. I grew up in a bi-lingual world where language plays a major role in self-expression and self-identity. Expressing myself and finding my identity has never been easy, however. Nevertheless, after many years of confusion and exploration of my ethnic background and heritage, I have come to identify myself as an Arab-American.

I was born in America, but my parents traveled across continents and an ocean from the Middle East. My house has been a dominantly English-speaking environment, but the backbone of my life is my culture, which is where the Arabic language appears. The native tongue of my people is a beautiful, spiritual language that has sadly come to be something feared in America, but a language and culture I have learned to pride as a part of who I am. My first language is English. I am fluent in it, while Arabic is something that I struggle with—language and culture. My parents make sure I know where I come from, but that I also take pride in my uniqueness. However, growing up with Arab parents I thought much like them seeing myself, like them, as a pure Arab. As the years passed and I matured, it has led to the realization that my ethnicity is not pure, but a mix. Living in America as an Arab has been arduous for me because I lived solely as an Arab denying my American birth place, until I realized something: why not live as an Arab-American everywhere. I am not fully either, so why not explore and bring out both sides? I have become a hybrid. This uniqueness is not glorious. It is almost a curse.

L-y-l-a is how I spell my name; however, I have always had two names. Pronunciation is everything when it comes to letters written on paper and that pronunciation is up to the reader. The reader interprets the letters based on experiences and knowledge. The readers of my name have two interpretations: Lila and Layla. Which pronunciation do you see? That would depend on your knowledge. Most Americans pronounce the “y” in my name as “i,” which makes sense based on their understanding of the English language. When my father named me, he tried keeping the Arabic pronunciation and making it unique by translating it as Lyla, combining his knowledge of the two languages as best as he could. The most common ways of translating my name are the spellings, Layla and Leila. For my father, the “y” in my name represents “ie,” which he pronounces as “ay,” giving my name its uniqueness. Therefore, I have always had this clear division between Americans and Arabs. Since I have grown up with this clear division, I have never really cared how people pronounced my name and I do not have a particular liking to either of them. Many Americans and Arabs (young and old) see my impartialness shameful or sad, but for me it is just a part of my life. I do not know what it is like to have one “standard” name. If I had to choose, I would be nameless. Choosing a name means, essentially, to pick a side. I cannot pick a side; I belong to both cultures. However, the line is starting to blur, dividing me more. Americans and Arabs now use both pronunciations making the line less divided and forcing me to choose the “right” one. The division, however, lies

deeper than the pronunciation of my name.

Language, in a way, is the key to a society's acceptance of a person. Through language humans can communicate with one another, establishing a sense of sameness. This "sameness" implicitly establishes a community because the humans that live together can identify with each other and feel comfortable relieving their hopes and fears to one another because they speak the same language. The magical part is that they accept each other based on the trust that is built. Language has a power effect on how a community coexists. This community is unknown to me, because I can only look from the outside in through the invisible glass divider.

In America, for the most part, Americans have accepted me but not based on my language and not with complete trust. Instead, I have been accepted because of my ambiguity. It is hard for people to decipher what my background is because I do not have an accent and have accustomed to the way of American life. Many people first assume me Mexican, Indian, or just plain old white. This ambiguity has never really bothered me though: sometimes being unknown is simpler. Besides, when people find out that my background is Middle Eastern, things become uncomfortable for me, especially in college. When I entered college, I was so excited to meet people who had open minds and wanted to explore everything. This is the impression I received, anyway, of all college students from graduates. However, when I entered college it was quite the opposite. I made some friends with a group of people in the Student Activity Center where there was one guy, in particular, who enjoyed talking politics. Well, that was something I enjoyed hearing other people's views on, so regretfully, I joined in. He found out that I was an Arab and disregarded the American part, banishing me from my home and explaining that all Arabs will and should die because we were no good Jew-haters. Taken aback, I just sat there and eventually walked out. What could I have said? Moreover, would it have mattered? Explaining my background is much easier than defending myself from people's reactions toward it, which seem unchangeable of those who do not care to listen.

Arabs, however, immediately know I am part American based on my butchered replication of the native tongue. Also, because I cannot read or write the elegant scribbles that represent the way of their communication. For this notability, they deny me full admission into the "club." I am an outsider, but an outsider who is becoming more familiar based on their own children's identities, which is forcing Arab parents to admit outsiders like myself. This is because many of their children are becoming hybrid, but we threaten the destruction of the authentic Arab.

Authenticity is a term important to Arabs, a term that Americans do not understand because of their unique situation. The United States is a unique entity because every person's background is foreign and mixing with one another, especially the culture. Americans are not native to the land, but immigrants, showing they pride themselves in accommodating to every cultural need. Arabs pride themselves on their "pureness." They have managed to keep a culture alive for many, many generations. They also managed to marry among themselves, preserving a unified language, tradition, and customs.

Growing up in my household has been different from many other Arabic

families. My parents did a balancing act, allowing me to know about my Arabic side and truly understanding my American side. Realizing that America is the only home I know, my parents equipped me with all the necessities to survive adding extra equipment, the Arabic, believing it to put me over the top. However, many other Arab households struggle to maintain this purity. My parents have accepted the fact and realized it is not practical to subject me to a culture that does not presently surround me. Language is how both types of households, although in immensely different ways, enforce culture for their children.

My parents speak only Arabic to me in certain situations—when they are upset with me and they want me to take them seriously, after they finish speaking Arabic to a friend or family member, and when they talk or tell stories about their home overseas. All the other talking space is used by the English language; however, for the majority of other Arab and Arab American homes the dominant language is only Arabic unless they are talking to an outsider. It is not that they do not know English, it is that they do not want to identify themselves as Americans or assimilate to the culture. Arabs come to America to offer their children a better education and a wider range of opportunities, jobs, and career options. They are here to stay and they here to live better lives. My parents are not here to stay but to offer me this choice, but in offering this choice, they realized the way to succeed is for me to gain more of the American culture and language. By realizing I needed to acculturate, they expected me to lose a part of my Arabic-ness. Many other Arab families expect, if not demand, their children to marry an Arab or an Arab American in order to preserve this “authenticity.” My parents would like me to make this choice, but accept any choice I make. They realize that it would be harder for me to accommodate to Arab ways and culture in an American society. However, other families raise their children ready and prepared to accommodate to these ways and traditions. Many Arab families contain their children by creating communities that surround them with many other families similar to themselves. My parents pulled away from that a little more. They wanted me to find myself, not for me to ask them who I am. Having this choice has been a constant struggle and sometimes makes me wish I lived in an all-Arab community or an all-American community, but the current situation has been much more rewarding.

I will continue identifying myself as an Arab-American. Many people, maybe even you the reader, see this title as just a title, but to me it is much more. “Arab-American” has a much deeper meaning. I have evolved my title from first identifying myself as an Arab, then to an Arab American, and finally an Arab-American. An Arab in America is someone who is born overseas and lives here. An Arab American, without a hyphen, is someone who does not want to commit to both titles; he or she usually prefers one to the other. However, the last title is a commitment to both. No matter how much my identity struggles and wants to play a tug of war, I will make sure that that hyphen always connects the two entities, keeping me whole. The first step, however, is for me to choose a name and to stick to it unwaveringly. Marhaba, my name is L(a)yla. I am an Arab-American. Who are you?