

**CET Jordan, Fall 2023 | Ellie Pollard**

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**Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece?** "Everyone, Black Students"

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## **Being Black in Jordan**

My whole life has been spent in a sort of purgatory; stuck in the middle of two worlds. As a biracial woman, adopted into a white family, it is extremely hard to fit into spaces without worrying whether I'm good enough for any of them. I grew up not knowing much of my black side, but I was never fully accepted into my white side either; even though that's what I was raised in. There is an assumption that it is impossible to live inside two worlds at once. Either you're too black, or not black enough. Too white, or not white enough. I'm light-skinned, so people assume that I can't possibly be black. I have an afro, so I can't possibly be white. I have spent so much time navigating complex stereotypes and questioning race as a social construct and the ways it impacts my life and the people around me.

For the longest time, I measured my presence in spaces based off of those two different sides of me, not realizing that it was okay to present myself as a whole, and to embrace every part of me. The status quo forbids the idea of gray areas when it comes to identity, and forces us into a black and white realm of strict boxes in which we are confined to. But reflection, self-awareness, and acceptance of my intersectional identities has taught me to embrace all of those grays. There is no exact place for me to exist in, and I think that goes for many people, as we all have different backgrounds, experiences, and racial, sexual, gender, national, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities.

I participated in CET Jordan because I wanted to accelerate and improve my Arabic language skills, as well as be immersed in culture and traditions other than my own. I had taken all the classes my school offered (which are not many) and had a desire to go even further. After being accepted into the program, my college made sure their students who would be studying abroad were mentally and physically prepared. They wanted us to acknowledge parts of our identities that may have been impacted during our study abroad experience and come up with coping mechanisms in case we experienced something we weren't prepared for. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it because it was never something that I had to consciously think about. My intersecting identities are something that I live with every day. I figured that the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal world wouldn't change wherever I went and that I would be fighting for a voice either way. This is not acceptable, but it is something that I need to recognize and find ways to navigate. As for the biracial part of me, I assumed that I would most likely get a similar reaction to being biracial as I do at home. Someone asking to touch my hair, wondering where I'm from, or even measuring my blackness against the shade of my skin. Although tiresome and annoying, it is something I am used to.

One thing I always note when I enter a new environment, is the appearance of people of color, and especially black people. Growing up, I didn't have black role models or people who could help me learn more about the beauty or history of my blackness, and so it has become extremely important to me to include myself as a part of the black community and immerse myself into everything that it is, because ultimately, that is me. Historically, there is very little black representation in many spaces such as these study abroad programs due to economic disparities from discrimination creating barriers to accessibility, educational inequities stemming from segregation and bias, housing segregation perpetuated by discriminatory housing practices, and systemic racism. These all intersect and are a part of a legacy of discrimination which affects every single aspect of black lives, including their ability to be a part of study abroad programs. I know a lot of people who weren't able to study abroad for a multitude of reasons, with many of them being directly related to the effects of systemic racism. I was impressed with the diversity of my CET cohort, but I still noticed that there were only three black students, including myself. My first thought when I notice a lack of black representation is to question what will be done to accommodate black voices and experiences within the space that we are in, as well as figure out ways to get more black students involved. Jordan does not have a very large black community, and so it was important for us to speak up and ask about Jordanian perceptions of black people, and more specifically, black Americans, and if we were going to be fighting for representation and respect like we do at home.

We started out the program with orientation, followed by an intense and immersive two weeks of classes. Orientation was spent talking out questions about sexual and gender identity, cultural expectations of women and men, language requirements, academic expectations, and the like. There were slides provided about all of these and how to navigate them. Support was provided if needed. However, when I asked about the black experience in Jordan, I was told that we are seen as Americans before we are acknowledged for our racial identity. Of course I found this extremely interesting and hard to believe; but it was the only thing that anyone had to say about the matter. It seemed that it was something that was just not talked about. I was confused, and even a little angry, that so much care was taken in exploring these other identities and how to navigate them while living abroad, while something so important to me was made to be more about my Americanness than my blackness. I wasn't really sure where to go from there, so I often talked to the other black students and made it a point to acknowledge and reflect on any encounters or experiences regarding my race while in Jordan.

I had a wonderful time in Jordan with CET. My language skills advanced astronomically, I met so many amazing people, and I found that I had a lot of personal growth in my self-confidence as I became more independent and learned how to adapt to a new environment. However, I did find myself, and my friends, in situations where we were perceived for our race before our nationalities as Americans. One thing that I immediately noticed was that people noticed me, and not subtly! I was often asked about my hair (for a while it was in a braided protective style) and I regularly had a lot of people observe me when I was walking on the street or into a café. I think it was really a combination of things, like my hair, skin color, and the fact that I was a foreigner. I never felt unsafe or uncomfortable; it was just something I definitely had to get used to. Overall, I was met with very similar reactions to what I would get at home.

Everyone in Jordan is so friendly, which made the transition from being at home and going to college there to living and studying in Amman very easy. People were genuinely curious, and all of us in the cohort were regularly asked about our goals while being in Jordan, why we were there, and why we decided to study Arabic in the first place. People were very easy to talk to and so supportive with our varying levels of Arabic speaking abilities. As I began settling into my life in Amman, and people in Sweifieh Village began to recognize me as someone who lived there, I also started traveling around to different cities like As-Salt, Jaresh, and Al-Aqaba.

I would get more looks and questions when I traveled outside of Sweifieh, along with another black student that I would often travel with. We were asked about our nationality, what we were doing there, and if we spoke Arabic. Many more questions were aimed at the person I was traveling with, who is darker-skinned than I am. People would make comparisons with him and famous black people they knew. We heard a couple of Will Smiths, some sports players, and a couple others I can't quite recall. We were associated with common stereotypes and were also met with quite a deal of colorism. When I was with the other student, he was asked if he was Nepali or Sudanese, and I was asked if I was Egyptian or Turkish. One time, I was even told that I look like Ice Spice!

Despite all of these interactions, we met them with laughter and humility. It just became something we got used to and prepared to deal with. There was never any malice involved, and it seemed like every encounter came from a place of genuine curiosity and friendliness, which sadly, I cannot say the same for similar interactions in the States. As we all know, discrimination takes place regularly in the US. When we walk into stores, when we're in "nice" neighborhoods (predominantly white ones), when we have our own cars, when we're walking in daylight AND at night. Black people are not safe from inquiries into our belonging or intentions within spaces, which most of the time are fueled by some kind of bias. That's not not something I ever experienced in Jordan or while I traveled to Turkey, Egypt, or Cyprus.

America has a much different history than the countries I visited while studying abroad, which in turn impacts how people view social constructions such as race and cultural identity. In a country like Jordan, colorism is probably more prominent than outright racism because so many of the people who live there are brown-skinned. Because of this, it makes sense that we were told we'd be perceived for our nationalities over our skin colors. Americans are known all over the world for their typical behavior and attitudes, which may trump our racial identities because of how prominent the American image is. Maybe there isn't such an emphasis on "blackness" or the American connotations of it in places like Jordan because of our own colonial and racist past. Being black in America means something different than being black in another country because it comes with the history of slavery, discrimination, and racism. This particular black experience is different from other countries, and so they identify differently. I think a good example is the difference between being a black American and being African. Often, we group them together because we see the color of their skin as the same, without acknowledging their different cultural practices, languages, and personal understandings of identity. Being African is different from being an African American, and vice versa.

Although, as I said, outright racism may not be as prominent in Jordan, colorism most likely is. Colorism was 100% brought about by Western stereotypes and their strategies to divide and conquer the East. Western countries such as Britain, France, and the US have been sewing and weaving these stereotypes and values of skin color into the foundations of the East, into every single crack and crevice, in hopes that it would make their colonial efforts stick. And they have. Colorism is why I was thought to be Egyptian or Turkish, while my friend was thought to be Nepali or Sudanese. I blended into the crowd easier than he did, and he was called out a lot more than I was for it. We have very similar reactions in the US, but those are always conditioned by the connotations of blackness and the racism and discrimination behind it, while our experiences in Jordan were not conditioned of the same exact roots, per say, but a sort of offshoot of certain stereotypes of American blackness. This is the difference between reactions to blackness being rooted in malice or bias, and those of inquisitiveness, which is what I experienced in Jordan.

As I continue to reflect on my time in Jordan, I realize that each and every part of all my identities were affected one way or another and that it's important to acknowledge the experiences that go along with them. Being biracial is not black and white, and neither are our other identities. There are many factors affecting how we are perceived beyond the images we have of ourselves, and it's okay to embrace them while also questioning them. There most definitely is a specific black experience in Jordan that is not tied to nationality, and I hope that this piece inspires more black students to participate in CET Jordan, or any other study abroad program, and that it shows that you can find places to fit in no matter where you are or who you're with. I hope that it also brings more awareness to what it means to have intersecting identities and how to navigate and recognize them within varying spaces.