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Pamela Flores

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BEING A MINORITY AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

PAMELA FLORES



Layout by Brittney Tavares. Photograph by Hannah Frankel, taken for a fashion club at Syracuse University. The image was not taken in association with this story.

In Peru, we are all “hermano, primo, tío” because we are very close. We treat people we barely know as if they were part of our family because it is our way, part of our charisma. Once I moved to the U.S., I did not take long to realize that life here would

be very different. The half smiles, the staring, the odd murmuring, made me realize people were colder, more distant. It didn't bother me much. I was prepared to embrace a new culture because after all, it had been my decision to study here.

It had been a month since I finally moved to the U.S. to study at Syracuse University. I had heard that life in the U.S. was very different from life back home. The people looked different; they talked differently. I understood the language, yet was ill prepared for and some-

times confused about the discourse and the manner of speaking here. Here in Syracuse, people were loud, but to me it all felt quieter. I hadn't expected anything out of the ordinary to happen, but it was still sort of a shock to me, as if I had opened my eyes for the first time.

It was my first year, and honestly, freshman classes won't stop you from having fun any day of the week. I knew once I arrived in the U.S. that there was more freedom, but it was not the same freedom as walking around your home in pajamas late at night, picking up late-night snacks, and sleeping in late in your own bed. There were rules and customs I was not used to here, all inside a freedom that felt limited. Yet I was excited to be living in another country, to experience a different way of life and have fun while doing it.

It was a Friday night, and I was hitting it off with some people I'd just met. We laughed together, enjoyed one another's company. Late at night, we went to a house party. It was at an old and dirty white house with sloping wood floors that made it feel as if every time someone stepped on them, the whole house was going to collapse. A little dark, a little narrow, very full of people—so much so that I felt the temperature rise from the moment I opened the door. I knew only a couple of friends who had come with me to this unknown place. I had a good feeling about the night.

I remember walking around the house with my friends. Stolen street signs, Natty Lights, and red cups filled the rooms. As the night went by, I decided to find a place to sit; I had made a bad choice of shoes, and I really needed to rest my feet. I was exhausted and decided to check my phone. A few minutes after that, I felt as if someone was looking at me. I looked up and saw a guy in a red polo shirt and a black cap staring at me. I looked down as I kept texting with my friends, but I noticed that he was slowly approaching me. I looked up once again, this time taking a few seconds to stare back. Why was he staring? He smiled before telling me, "You're so exotic."

I felt as if the music had stopped, and I couldn't help putting on a weird face. He was still smiling proudly. Not having heard my answer, he tried to repeat what he had said, but before he was able to, I got up from the sofa and left.

As I walked around the house in search of my friends, thousands of thoughts ran through my head. I thought maybe I had been very bad for leaving the man in such a way, but a voice in my head told me that it had been the right thing to do. The moment kept replaying in my mind over and over again. I thought of the red polo shirt, the black cap. Was he following me?

I left the great crowd of people and saw my friends standing next to the door in hopes of getting some cold air. The first thing I did was tell them in a comedic tone what had happened to me. I didn't actually think it was funny, but we were at a party, and I didn't want to spoil the vibe of the place. But another part of me needed to say it. I needed to let it go; I needed someone else to tell me that what I had done was fine. My friends laughed at his attitude, but that was not what I was looking for. I wanted them to talk to me seriously—I don't know why, this wasn't the time, but still, that was what I needed. I needed someone to speak to me clearly and seriously about what had happened, needed someone to make me feel less uncomfortable or even just to tell me "You're exaggerating—let it go" But nobody did. They all just laughed.

That scene stuck in my head all weekend. Even today, remembering it, I'm not sure why it affected me so much. It was the first time I had experienced a microaggression, or at least it was the first time I had taken it seriously. Maybe this was because I was far from home, maybe it was because I knew nobody here was going to understand me, but this event really marked

me. It happened in a matter of seconds, but even now, after more than a year, my brain has ways of reminding me of it from time to time.

Maybe it hit me so hard because I would never be able to talk to the guy again. Maybe I needed an explanation; maybe I wanted to give him a chance to express himself correctly, or correct his words, or remain silent. But the truth is, I will never know what he meant. I will never know if he said it "with good intentions" or to minimize me.

I would like to say that this was the only experience with microaggression I have had, but that would not be true. This was only my first such experience. Looking back, I am surprised

As the months passed, I experienced what being a minority was like. I became very timid when speaking in English. I became very shy when it came to class participation. I did not want others to hear my accent; I felt that every time I opened my mouth, I would trip on my words. Before coming to the U.S., I had been very confident about my reading and writing, but once I was here, it was as if I forgot how to do both.

I began to feel comfortable around only certain people. I began to limit my contact with others. I started speaking only to other foreign students because theirs was the only company in which I felt accepted, safe.

"HOW COULD I BE ASHAMED OF MY MOTHER TONGUE? HOW COULD I LET A COUPLE OF LOOKS DESTROY ME SO FAST?"

it took a month for such a thing to happen.

When I am walking down the street talking on the phone in Spanish, some people stare, not in a way that makes me think, maybe, they like what I'm wearing...because the eyes don't lie. Everyone knows what it feels like not to be well received or accepted. And it hurts to admit that during my first year, I was embarrassed to speak Spanish in public because I was afraid people would look at me judgmentally. How could I be ashamed of my mother tongue? How could I let a couple of looks destroy me so fast? Several moments have made me feel uncomfortable about my identity. Misplaced comments have come my way more times than I can count, ranging from people asking if my country is "civilized" to comments as small as "I can't believe there are Starbucks in Peru." I mean, we are from the same continent!

The following semesters were different. I started to feel uncomfortable on campus. I got more homesick than I should have and thought more and more about my identity and culture. Every new incident reminded me of what I was—a minority.

The experience that perhaps scared me the most happened when I was eating with a friend on South Campus. Like everyone else, we were talking and laughing. We didn't do anything different from others, apart from speaking Spanish. A tall, long-haired guy was walking by, and the moment he passed us he stopped abruptly. He turned to look directly into my eyes. It took me a few seconds to realize I felt scared. I stopped talking, stopped smiling. He stood there for a few more seconds until he decided to continue on his way—slowly, very slowly. I had never seen my friend more terrified. With-

out saying anything, we grabbed our bags and left. It took four or five minutes before either of us said a word.

I still see this guy on the bus or walking on campus. I always walk a little faster when I do. I look down. I make sure I don't say a word in Spanish.

I never have the opportunity to express or defend myself for fear of sounding stupid, for fear that nobody will understand me and that people will shut me up. Despite meeting people of many different nationalities, I will always be a minority at Syracuse University. Today, writing this, I am still afraid. I'm afraid that some people would prefer me silent.

On the night of November 6, racial slurs were written in a bathroom stall of Day Hall.

"I STILL SEE THIS GUY ON THE BUS OR WALKING ON CAMPUS. I ALWAYS WALK A LITTLE FASTER WHEN I DO."

Like me, Syracuse's Department of Public Safety kept quiet, perhaps to avoid chaos or making people feel uncomfortable. Sometimes violence begins as a microaggression—with a comment, with a joke—but sometimes it begins with acts like these in which hate and violence are portrayed in their purest and most evident form. More than twelve other incidents have happened since that night.

The types of aggression I have experienced since that day have been different. People are no longer limiting themselves to stares or comments disguised as innocent jokes. Attackers no longer feel ashamed and antagonized.

During a class, the teacher asked us what we thought about the recent events. As always, to avoid chaos, I decided to keep quiet. Nobody spoke at first. Maybe everyone expected me to

say something given that I was the only person of color in my class. When others saw that I would not speak, the comments started, very shyly. "The protests are not worth it," said one student, while another added, "This is a marketing scheme." One student suggested that to avoid racism, more students of color should be part of the university. I was beginning to accept his idea when another student abruptly said, "It's against the law to prioritize people of color." *Prioritize? Against the law?* I kept looking down. I held my hands together, hoping the teacher would interrupt. But the comments kept coming, and I zoned out for a while. As I forced my mind to leave the room, I heard comments such as "I don't feel simple graffiti warrants this kind of response," and "People at

SU are never going to be satisfied."

Why did I deserve to be there? I felt like a burden to this country.

I went to office hours after this incident. I tried to look at my teacher without letting a tear drop; I tried so hard I started shaking. My hands began to sweat. My teacher stopped speaking and just looked at me in the eye. It did not take long for me to burst into tears.

No shame. No fear. At last, I could speak.

This was the same teacher in whose class we had a conversation about diversity nearly a month ago. You might not believe me if I told you that during this talk not a single student of color gave an opinion. Why were we so scared? The talk was led by white students who insisted that Syracuse University was a diverse institution. They spoke about diversity as if one

student of color per class was enough to meet the legal requirement, or as if having been in high school with three people of color meant you had the right to speak about diversity. I saw how some of the people of color moved their heads slightly in disapproval of the comments. I wanted to raise my voice, but I did not want to start a fight. I did not want to bother anyone.

The first effect of terrorism is psychological, and they are doing what they know best, keeping us silent. This is terrorism.

There are different types of aggression. Not all are as obvious as graffiti, but there are less obvious kinds of aggression that occur, for example, in the form of stares, signifying threats. How does one report something like that? How does one address threatening looks or comments such as the one I received at the party? Why do we have to wait for graffiti to accept that there is hate on campus?

When are we going to realize that violence and racism are a reality on this campus? Most important, what are we waiting for? What are we waiting to have happen to make authorities realize there is an evident issue, a threat?

Let's talk about microaggressions. Let's talk about murmurs and stares. We shouldn't need a manifesto or graffiti to make us realize that the institutionalization of violence is intertwined with the crisis the university is experiencing. Hate has roots in our university. Only by speaking about every kind of hate will we uproot the violence. Most crucially, let's talk, knowing that there is someone out there listening. Let's fight for the creation of accessible platforms where we can talk about what many people don't consider a threat.

The creation of accessible platforms would end the cycle of silence and violence. We are aware that violence can be combated by speak-

ing up, but it is so difficult to do so. It is so difficult to raise your voice against violence knowing repercussions might come, knowing you could make someone angry, knowing you could be shot. Accessible platforms on which to report incidents would offer freedom. Anonymous reporting would give all people a chance to express themselves without feeling threatened. I understand how hard it is to say what you feel, especially when you are in the spotlight. I dream of the day we have a platform that gives those who want to speak the opportunity to do so with freedom and confidence. It would serve to support and give peace of mind to those who remain silent as well, as we need to acknowledge that people should never be forced to speak.

I do not intend to be a singular ambassador for people of color, and neither should anyone else. We do not deserve the pressure that is put on us. We do not deserve all the looks we get when people talk about racism or diversity. We should not have the responsibility of educating people about hate. We deserve comfort and peace—peace of mind and peace in our own skins. We need to know that wherever we are on campus, we will be accepted regardless of our race, culture, or beliefs. It is not about being an ambassador or being a representative; it is about collectivism and support.

Dear Syracuse University:

Give us the chance to feel supported, heard, valued. Because I am a person of color, and I have as many feelings as any other person. Because I am a person of color, and my voice deserves to be heard as much as any other voice. Because violence has no place on campus. Violence has no place in society.