

# A Portrait of the Student as Diaspora

By Ali Hamandi



*Ali's family at the Ja'far At-Tayan mosque, Karak, Jordan, 2003*

I am not at home at Penn. My first semester, I thought more about my home and high school friends than I did anything else. A leave of absence is how I spent the following semester. On my first day back, I called my dad to ease my increasing anxiety, and my web browser accumulated tabs related to transfer application deadlines and credit equivalencies for universities

in Michigan. I didn't transfer, ultimately. There are infinite reasons for my graceless transition to college life. One Friday night halfway into my first semester, a friend and I lamented the chasm that massive wealth differences create between people. Both of us came from modest backgrounds and were not only immigrants but also the children of refugees. At the time, I was convinced that the av-

erage Ivy student took their enrollment for granted, that to them the possibility of failure only existed in an invisible periphery, that their schema of human life excluded the unforeseen convolutions and disasters it unfailingly undergoes—whether this judgement of my cohort is true is irrelevant.

In my late teens, I was fearful or anxious about nearly everything in my life, even though such feelings were not always rational. I went off to college uncertain of my abilities as a student and with a father months away from unemployment, convinced that the success of my parents' migration rested upon my shoulders. I hated Penn because I wanted to find in my classmates a shared outlook on the world and—admittedly—a shared anxiety, and I didn't.

I could not divorce this alienation on campus from my heritage, insofar as my heritage implicated land under American invasion, which in turn imposed refugeehood and financial instability. This provisional logic is incomplete (and abridged): I've met other Muslims and Arabs on campus—international students and otherwise—who did not share my disaffection. So, my heritage contributed to my alienation, but it didn't exclusively constitute it. Somewhat similarly, an obvious point: there is more to my heritage than how it divorced me from others.

There was no definitive moment in which I assimilated to Penn or university life. At some point, absolute cynicism is tempered by friendship and acquaintance with other marginalized students; positive relations accumulate and roots develop and proliferate. I'm eventually cushioned by my academic performance and the guarantee of non-failure. Over time, it becomes possible to compart-

mentalize friendships forged at university and the student body at large, and in turn to separate the student body and educational faculty from Penn as an institution—one that is amoral at best and deceptively immoral at worst, inseparably embedded in systems of oppression, and masked with a humanist, intellectual mythos despite its rabid pre-professionalism.

This assimilation process is something everyone experiences. I think I had a harder time than most because of where I hail from and the effects that has on my temperament. Those same factors also prevent me from growing to love this university, even in the abstract.

I can cherish my time at university with individuals tied to it, or maybe cherish the possibilities admission to this university promised—but I can't cherish Penn the way one might cherish a favorite sports team, or their hometown, or their family. I was eventually at home here, but from a distance.

This isn't to say that my relationship to Penn is entirely negative. My time here on its own is a mark of immense fortune. I will forever view the university campus as a place and space for self-improvement. I've met people who inspire me to self-confidence and optimism, people who have comforted me at my lows and shared my perspective, and people who augmented my appreciation for the dramatic aspects of human personality—people who understand life as fundamentally poetic and scriptural. My vantage point from alienation helped me to internalize how little perspective on the world a small-city upbringing permits (even when



impacted by immigration), and through that I now better understand life both in its thrownness and radical freedom for human action. These two things are intertwined: thrownness is the idea that everyone comes into life with pre-imposed boundaries—historical, material, metaphysical, or otherwise—and radical freedom for human action comes from realizing that living meaningfully within these boundaries necessitates a sober reckoning with them in the first place.

This piece isn't a comprehensive account of my university years as Arab diaspora. This is maybe more free-form. The general outline of my situation isn't unique, but it's historically recent—as is the proliferation of the Arab diaspora.

Sometime during college, it became impossible to understand myself only with the sentimentality of a personal, atomized perspective. My anxieties about university and outside of it, my hopes, my relation to my ethnic heritage—their very immediacy insists they be foreground. But at some point, I began to primarily understand my life as the consequence of external factors. The material realities and historical developments beginning before my birth that contribute to my temperament and attitudes, my parents' suffering and those of their relatives and progeny—that is my life in its thrownness. I owe to Penn insofar as I most clearly saw this during my time here.

To more earnestly live the role of a university student—one particularly at an institution like Penn—to take full advantage of the abundance of resources, to live and study with purpose, and to reconcile my professional curriculum with an overarch-

ing humanist vision—this is how I understand my life in its freedom for action for as long as I'm at Penn. In my mind, I have this image of a scholar utterly devoted to their practice and study—an ideal, yes, but the sentiment remains: I live the connection between education and salvation (intellectual, moral, material) more fully than my cohort, I believe, because of my background. I cannot not take my time at Penn seriously. The whole endeavor is suffused with meaning, and it has moral and religious undertones.

What I'm trying to say with this piece, through its non-sequiturs and unresolved narratives, is that my circumstance bars me from a casual relation towards my life and its obvious mortality. That you can read my writing, alone, admits an immense amount of good luck—one most of my family tree is without. This sheer alignment of stars denies one agency and invites gratitude (and also anxiety and a guarding hypervigilance). How I make sense of that, as Arab diaspora, perhaps molded by a cultural and religious inheritance only half-lived due to emigration, is through study which aspires to moral edification.

As a recipient of the sacrifices refugeehood and immigration entail, I do not have the luxury to live my life only for myself. In essence, I've already lived and died. But to live for my parents and their descendants is a minor, inconsequential death.

When I've died in actuality, and when those after me have their turn reckoning with the thrownness of their lives and the paradoxical freedom that arises therefrom, I want to have left beyond more reason for optimism. In my young adulthood, I begin that foremostly with earnest study.

