

My Experience as a “French” Person

First things first, let me describe to you my upbringing in a multilingual and very culturally diverse family. My ethnic background is also very complex and complicated, as I’m a combination of Lebanese, Greek, Turkish, German, Irish, and Canadian (safe to say, it is complicated). My father, Fadi Maamari, grew up in a French-speaking, Christian family in the capital of Lebanon, Beirut. His mother is Greek and his father is Turkish. During my dad’s teenage years, he and his family emigrated from Lebanon to places like Greece (temporarily) and Canada (where he lived in his early adult years) because of the civil war in Lebanon. My mother, Deborah Garvey, who kept her maiden name after she married my dad, grew up in an Irish-Catholic family in Chicago. More specifically, she grew up in Beverly, a suburb located in South Chicago that was, and still is, dominantly Irish Catholic. With that being said, throughout my childhood, I was constantly exposed to the French language, as my parents and I would only speak to one another in French. Because of this constant exposure to the French language during my early years as an infant and child, I actually learned how to speak French before I learned how to speak English. At home, whenever I would try to speak to my parents in English, they would immediately tell me to stop speaking to them in English and go back to speaking to them in French. It was quite annoying, but it really helped develop my French speaking skills throughout my life. Even to this day, my parents only let me speak English at home when I’m with a friend who doesn’t speak French. In addition, I feel like my early education (pre-high school) contributed a lot to my becoming a fluent French speaker. From Pre-K up until 8th grade, I attended an international school called “International School of the Peninsula”, where I learned under a rigorous bilingual curriculum (I had a mix of classes taught in French and classes taught in English). I was also fortunate to be able to visit France multiple times and actually experience French culture and way of life over there.

The dominant narrative that I’ve dealt with for most of my life is that if your skin is of a lighter tone (more white) and you speak French, then you must be French or your family (or ancestors) must be from France. Sadly, I’ve dealt with (and still deal with) this dominant narrative most frequently at Bellarmine, especially during my freshman year, because that’s when I met a lot of new people. From my freshman year to present day, when people at Bellarmine hear me speaking French with my parents (generally the first time for them hear my speak French), they immediately assume my ethnic background and say: “Oh are you French? Are your parents from France?”. What is annoying is that I get asked those two questions every single time someone heard me speak French for the first time. They assume that I’m of French descent every single time. The worst thing about it is that most people who ask these questions

know my full name (my last name), they know that it's not French, and, despite all that, they still ask me those two questions. I didn't realize it until recently, but those questions are microaggressions, as these people assume that I'm French simply because of the whiteness of my skin. I think those questions are microaggressions because people ask me those two questions despite me telling most of them about my Lebanese roots prior to them asking those questions. What frustrates me the most is that rather than asking how I learned how to speak French or what my ethnic background is (if they don't know), they immediately assume that I'm French and completely ignore my Lebanese roots. Students at Bellarmine aren't the only people who do this or have done this - many adults and even a few members of faculty at Bellarmine ask me or have asked me those questions. Furthermore, now that I think about it, I've dealt with these microaggressions and the dominant narrative that "if you're a lighter skinned French-speaker, you must be French" much more frequently at Bellarmine compared to my old school (the international school). I think that the reason I've been the subject of these microaggressions more frequently at Bellarmine compared to my old international school is because of how culturally and ethnically diverse the community at my old school was. At my old school, almost everybody had very complex ethnic and cultural backgrounds, so students and faculty never made assumptions about somebody based on their race or skin color.

The main reason this dominant narrative that "if you're a lighter skinned French-speaker you must be French" exists and the reason it has persisted throughout my life is that many people do not know that French is very commonly spoken in Lebanon. A lot of people also don't know that Lebanon was a colony of France between 1920 and 1944. People also don't know that Lebanon became a French colony because it was administered to France at the end of World War I in 1920 (fall of the Ottoman Empire) by the League of Nations. I think that the reason people do not know this about Lebanon (both at Bellarmine and throughout America) is because it is not covered at all in any history class or history textbook. Although 24 years isn't a long period of time in terms of being colonized, the French caused drastic social, religious, and cultural changes in Lebanon nonetheless (and people tend just not know about that). For example, France spread Christianity in Lebanon and established its presence there by distributing seats in the Lebanese parliament on a ratio of six-to-five in favor of Christians back in 1943. Actions like this have had drastic, long-lasting effects on Lebanon's religious identity and makeup -- a 2017 study found that 36.2% of Lebanon's population identifies themselves as Christian (compared to the 57.7% who identify as Muslim, including Sunni and Shi'a). In addition, while under French control, the French language was taught in schools alongside Arabic and it became commonly used in Lebanon's government. Actions and events like this have caused the French language to persist

in Lebanon to this day, as 70% of Lebanon's secondary schools currently teach French as a second language (and it is taught way more often than English). People's lack of knowledge about France's impact on Lebanon's culture and way of life has led to the formation of the dominant narrative that French-speakers, specifically French speakers who have a lighter skin tone, are French or from France.

Another dominant narrative that I've faced in my life is that "if you're middle eastern, then you must have darker (or more tan) skin". Within this narrative, I've had to deal with the common belief that "if your skin is lighter or more white, you can't be middle eastern". Compared to how I faced the dominant narrative that "if you're a lighter skinned French-speaker, you must be French" in my Bellarmine community, I dealt with (and sometimes still do deal with) the dominant narrative that "if your skin is lighter or more white, you can't be middle eastern" in my Bay Area Lebanese community. Just to give you some background information, I'm very close friends (and have been close friends my whole life) with extremely active members of the Lebanese community here in the Bay Area. Although my family isn't officially part of this community, we know a lot of the people who are members of this community and we help the Lebanese community in different ways from time to time (whenever and however we can). Most notably, every year, my mom & I attend the Lebanese Festival in Redwood city and volunteer there for the whole day. When I volunteer, I hang out with my friends and volunteer with them. With that being said, whenever my friends introduce me to another member of the community and they say my name, the person who I'm being introduced to (who is part of this Lebanese community) looks at me weird for a second and acts a bit surprised. They make this weird face (that has an unsympathetic look on it) as they try to make the connection between my overall appearance (specifically my skin color and skin tone) and my last name. Even though I know the person isn't intending to hurt my feelings when they make that face, it still hurts because it kind of makes me feel unwelcome and it kind of makes me feel like an outcast. Every time I have an encounter like this with someone in the Lebanese community, I start to feel like I am less Lebanese (if that even makes sense). After I had several interactions like this with other Lebanese people, I really started to think about how race is a social construct. I started to think about how the idea of race and the idea that a set of physical appearances define who we are (and who we are "the same as") because, even though I was a real Lebanese person (ethnically and culturally), it felt like I wasn't one because my Lebanese peers didn't see me as one. I also felt increasingly distant from the people in the Bay Area Lebanese community over time because a large majority of them spoke Arabic instead of French (they only spoke basic French).

Another thing that I noticed is that the College Board and the U.S. Department of

Education, especially in standardized testing and college applications, sees Middle Eastern people as the same as “white” people despite the fact that they are nothing like “white” people. I also have an issue with the term “white”, as it incorrectly groups together people based on their physical appearances (most notably people with lighter skin tones) and completely ignores how they may be completely different culturally. By forcing different people to identify themselves on education (and testing) forms as belonging to the same “race”, the College Board and the Department of Education effectively denies the existence of peoples’ unique cultural and ethnic backgrounds. When the College Board and the Department of Education do this, it’s as if they are completely ignoring the differences between people. By coupling “whites” and middle easterners, the College Board and the Department of Education completely ignores and reduces the importance of the different religious beliefs that individuals of the “same race” may have.