

Maria Diss

What Europe means to me

The unavoidable truth that all dissent and division amongst the human race is born from the frivolity of social construct can never take away the inexplicably comfortable fact that belonging to a country can feel like belonging to a family. Being able to define yourself without having to feel unguided can be incredibly relieving. Mannerisms, idioms and facial expressions are shared across an entire nation until suddenly it is as if you are part of a group of people that no matter the circumstance, they will feel the same inherent connection - one that stems from a deep-rooted synchrony in culture, thought, language, behaviour. And whilst these commonalities are often generalised, irksomely summarised by patriots of other, 'grander' nations - they are what we come back to when we feel threatened, untethered. What the European Union provides us with is an expanse of merged, indiscriminate, compatible cultures - customs that thrive so close together that they are adopted and incorporated into each other until they are no longer distinguishable. These are the beautiful products of a long-and-hard-fought-for era of peace, but they are also manifestations of a dangerous phenomenon - one that erases those fabricated borders, those reassuring dissections that help to separate and organise us, that help to define us.

But what does Europe mean to me? Primarily, it means safety, freedom, internationalism and collaboration. It represents a place that despite its internal differences still fits within one sphere, still shares a common point of origin; still spreads this sensation of ubiquitous Europeanism. On a more personal level, Europe allows me to call something my home - no matter how general. Growing up half French and half Argentine, I felt as if there was no part of me that can truly take ownership of either country. I recognize and understand French quirks, can recall distinct details that remind me of my Argentine family, but there is never a sense of membership; only disconnection and awkward observation. My English is internationalised, my accent impossible to place; there is nowhere I can say that I am from, nowhere I can go back to. Often, when asked to consider myself, my qualities, my attributes and weaknesses, my preferences and my tendencies - I feel unable to come up with any definitive answers. I am a mix and there is nothing that can undo such a fact. To a French person I am tainted, my accent offputting, my expressions foreign anglicisms. To an Argentine I can barely speak their language, hardly keep up with their jokes and their cynicism - I am a fraud in a Messi shirt. Whilst Europe makes us curious about other cultures, it also makes us wary, uneasy, desperate to prove that we are unique, that we are French, German, Luxembourgish, not simply European. Like any sweeping generalisation that groups together infinitely different Asian, African, Southern American countries, so can this one offend and frustrate. In my case, I only feel lost.

As is graciously stated by the Franco-Rwandan rapper Gaël Faye, 'et comme l'Afrique est en instance de sang entre ciel et Terre, j'ai le cul entre deux chaises, j'ai décidé de m'asseoir par terre!' (in the way that Africa finds itself between the sky and the earth, my ass is between two chairs - so I decided instead to sit on the floor!). This line has always resonated with me as it describes quite accurately the common complex of mixed-race or multi-cultural children. Growing up feeling as if torn between two vastly different groups of people can be disorienting. Not knowing where you're from, not having been immersed totally in one culture or the other,

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one is left feeling closest to neither and essentially closest to nothing. Cultures of their own are created, born from the mingling of their parents' customs - beautiful and unique, but at the same time alienating. Whilst Europe gives me some sort of place to call home, I still have trouble defining it. What is Europe? The easily crossed borders (formerly) between the UK, Switzerland and Luxembourg allowed me to grow up in three very different countries all united through their membership or cooperation with the European Union. The unspoken community that is created amongst Europeans makes travelling easy, enjoyable, welcoming but also poisoned with undertones of irritation and discomfort - as if we were tired of all being so close together. Regardless, the peace that the EU has managed to achieve is commendable - the first and longest successfully peaceful string of years in the history of humanity - and this peace has given me an incredibly privileged childhood, one with education, freedom of speech, free of war and for the most part, free of sexism.

In the end, despite my confusion, I have decided that this is what Europe means to me - it means a wonderful place to grow and thrive. Whilst I will inevitably come across issues of identity and self-determination throughout my life - it will be because it is something I must face as a developing woman, not as someone confused by the globalisation of her home.

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