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Wilson Essay

### “Quasi-American”: The Segregation of U.S Citizens by the Hyphen

I've always loved to travel. I actually enjoy spending seemingly endless hours at the airport. I like sitting outside the gates and watching the planes take off while waiting to board my flight. I like feeling the vibrations of the starting engine, and how butterflies somehow appear in my stomach when the plane finally lifts from the ground. I even like airline food. I like almost every aspect of flying. *Almost*. Every time I have flown internationally, I have been pre-checked by the Travel Security Agency no matter what country I'm in. When I had a layover in Switzerland a few years ago, I almost missed my flight because I was being patted down by the TSA. While my friends were boarding the flight, I was stuck behind the gate, answering questions about myself.

This past August I spent two weeks visiting some friends in France. I booked a flight out of Montreal, because I figured it would be cheaper and less complicated for me to fly out of Canada. As always, I was pulled aside by airport security and questioned before boarding the flight. The security officer looked incredibly daunting, and incredibly suspicious of me. Like usual, he asked what I was doing in Canada, where I was going, where I lived, where I was born. For some reason, it always surprises TSA agents when they learn I was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, and not some mysterious, exotic land. When I ask why I get searched instead of other travelers, I'm told that I was selected by a random pre-check. But don't be fooled, there's nothing random about airport security checks. I don't believe that anything about my appearance screams foreign. I'm barely five foot one, and with long brown hair and pink travel luggage, I hardly think I am the definition of dangerous. Nonetheless, I get pre-checked when I cross international borders. When this happens, I have to hand over my passport, remove layers of clothes, and subject my bags to extensive searches.

I've become entirely certain that I get pre-checked by the TSA because I have a unique, often unpronounceable last name. I guess *Mahaleris* doesn't necessarily instill the same sense of security as *Smith*. I often wonder what would happen if my passport was labeled “Muslim-American”, rather than just “American”. Maybe the TSA pre-checks would be more evasive, more time-consuming. Maybe I would have missed my flight altogether. This is just a fraction of the dilemmas that half of the U.S population faces today with racial profiling.

There was once a time when nobody tried to justify racial profiling. In the beginning, racial profiling existed only in concealed forms known then as the penalties of slavery. I'm talking about the era that is what we call “America's Greatest Shame”, the historic days that birthed the Equal Rights Movement. During that time, a black enslaved man could not walk alone at night without fear of being caught, questioned, and captured. Today, a person of color walks around with the same fears. A black man can go for a drive, look back in his rearview mirror, and know

without a doubt, that he's being tailed by an officer not because he was speeding, but because he is of "questionable background". Racial profiling exists in every aspect of our society. I see it driving down the highway, at the Supermarket, in airport security lines.

When nearly half the U.S population is required to hyphenate their identities, it means that the U.S does not believe that all people are equal. That hyphen, "African-American", "Indian-American", "Muslim-American", means that while others are deserving enough to be labeled "American", the rest of the population is asked to identify where they come from, assuming that our home is not theirs, too. After decades of trial and error, civil liberty protests, unimaginable sacrifice and struggle, it's unconscionable that in 2016, we are still trying to divide people. When nearly half the U.S population is required to hyphenate their identities, it means that centuries of segregation are still not over. When nearly half the U.S population is required to hyphenate their identities, it means that we encourage the alienation of entire communities and backgrounds, in the very country that prides itself on racial diversity. When nearly half the U.S population is required to hyphenate their identities, it means we believe in "quasi-Americans".