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FOR CLAUDIA RANKINE

You are twenty-two years old, living abroad working as a language assistant and cultural ambassador. You understand the language part, but you are unsure about your role as a cultural ambassador. What is American culture anyway?

Your Spanish roommates invite you along to a concert in the plaza. You attend, and meet many of their friends. Your closest roommate introduces you to her friend and tells you that he is from Africa. You don't catch his name the first time because it is late and loud and Spain. Your roommate grabs you by the shoulder and shouts in your ear "se llama nigga Julian". Startled, you finish the introductory exchange, dos besos and all, and let yourself fall back silently into the noise, not sure how or when to approach the subject.

Later, back at your apartment, you try to explain to your roommates why they can't use that word. They, collectively, tell you it doesn't mean the same thing here. You argue that no matter where you are the word is the same. You say it is the same word. They insist it doesn't mean the same thing. You continue to search your vocabulary for the right Spanish words to convey your American beliefs. Is this what it means to be a cultural ambassador?

A few weeks later, you are walking to the post office with your roommate. You spot Julian riding his bike down the street and you wave. Your roommate is confused and asks you who you are waving at. You say Julian. She laughs and tells you no, it isn't Julian. You remain firm in your belief and wave again as the man on the bike passes you and your roommate on the street corner. The man does not return your greeting and your roommate smiles as she tells you not all black people are the same.