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A Challenge to Multicultural America and the American Dream

America is presented as a multicultural country that is full of opportunity and prosperity for all people. This idea dates back to the start of immigration when many people came to America because they were oppressed in their home country and desired freedom. The freedom that immigrants were seeking, coupled with their oppression, coincides with the concept of the American Dream. It is widely believed that living the American Dream means arriving in America with almost nothing, and working for a better life. *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* and *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* challenge the idea of multiculturalism in America as well as the concept of the American Dream in relation to two oppressed groups: Arabs and Blacks.

How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America by Moustafa Bayoumi explores the lives of Arab youth and young adults who currently live in Brooklyn, New York. These young people have lived in America for most of their lives, but are constantly faced with dissatisfaction and discrimination both socially and religiously. Despite living in America and adopting cultural norms, young Arabs constantly struggle with what it means to be American and how America can consider itself multicultural in the face of discrimination. The book also challenges the idea of the American Dream in that parents of these youth thought they were choosing a better life in America, but found that this was not necessarily the case.

While all of the stories told in this book are both heart wrenching and inspiring, two stories stand out in highlighting the book's relation to American Studies. Akram is a Palestinian-American who worked at his father's grocery store in Brooklyn while attending college full time. The grocery store, called Mike's Food Center, is considered a middleman minority because it is run by an ethnic businessman who is the middleman between inner-city clients and sellers. Arab Americans are the most common owners of these stores. When Akram's father arrived in the country in 1971, he owned hardly anything and worked diligently to save money and start a family. A generation later, Akram's father owned Mike's Food Center, which paid for Akram's education. While this sounds like the "textbook American Dream," it was not enough for Akram. He wanted more in his life than working in the store. Akram's story challenges the American Dream because while it is believed that the dream is to come to the country with nothing and rise up through hard work, this is not always satisfactory.

This story also mentions that before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans were practically seen as White; no one bothered them when they owned stores or walked on the street. After the attacks, Arab identity was questioned—no one knew where they fit in society. Arabs who owned stores such as Mike's Food Center were targeted and killed. America considers itself multicultural, yet Arabs face complications like this daily. Akram's story argues against the most common form of the American Dream and showcases the place (or lack thereof) for Arabs in "multicultural America."

Yasmin's story is one of social and religious discrimination. In *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, Yasmin recounts an event that occurred one afternoon while she was on the bus to Taco Bell. An Arab woman walked onto the bus holding a

baby against her chest. Soon after, a White couple started to cause commotion, asking everyone what the woman was holding and whether it was a bomb. Even when Yasmin told the couple that the woman was holding a baby, they continued to question it, and asked the bus driver to pull over and check. This angered Yasmin because she believed that if the woman had been White, no one would have questioned what she was holding.

Yasmin is very religious; she covers her hair, prays five times a day, and fasts during Ramadan. When she had the opportunity to run for high school secretary, Yasmin was ecstatic. She followed all of the rules, campaigned, and was voted into the position. She was excited for her new job, but when one of her friends asked if she was eager for the first school dance and she replied that she would not be able to attend due to her religious morals, a spiral of unfortunate events began. The Coordinator of Student Affairs found out that Yasmin was not planning to attend the dance and told her that she would need to resign from her position. When other students needed to miss the dance for religious reasons like the first night of Jewish Passover or for non-religious reasons like a sweet sixteen party, they were permitted to miss the dance without resigning from their positions. After trying multiple organizations, Advocates for Children took Yasmin's case for free, and eventually the school admitted its faults and discrimination. Though Yasmin won the case against her school and eventually became president, the discrimination she had to deal with was unacceptable and is only one example of grievances that Arabs deal with in America.

How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America is powerful in that the stories told about Arab youth are very blunt and heartfelt. Though the book was difficult to read from an emotional standpoint, it was an easy read structurally. The book increases a

reader's sympathy for Arab youth and increases consciousness of White actions and their impact on other races and religions. Rather than using the book as a way to complain about the hardships that Arabs face in America, Bayoumi used the book to tell stories of discrimination as well as the ways the youth were able to overcome the hardships they were faced with. The book was well-written, thought out, and effective in informing readers of daily struggles that young Arabs face.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is structured quite differently than the previously discussed work. Taylor's book references studies and statistics and strives to discover the reasons why African Americans are still oppressed in a country that considers itself multicultural with equal opportunities for all. Rather than a compilation of stories, it is written similar to a scholarly article. It counters common excuses as to why Blacks should not feel discriminated against any longer. The book provides background information on the position of Blacks in society and gradually builds to the Black Lives Matter movement and its importance.

The book focuses on three main reasons why racism is in fact still prevalent and why the Black Lives Matter movement is crucial to Black liberation. The first reason that Taylor provides is the culture of poverty. She argues that politicians attempt to link poverty to Black culture and the Black family. This viewpoint is shared by Conservatives and Liberals alike because it is the easiest explanation. Politicians blame absent fathers and indifference toward education for the lack of Black success in society. Taylor suggests that to recognize this form of institutional racism in America would mean denouncing America as the moral leader of the world and to completely redistribute wealth and resources; politicians would not be willing to do either.

Rather than providing resources for impoverished Black communities, the government sends role models for the youth or more police for peace. According to Taylor, the culture of poverty is an indirect way of saying that Black hardships are due to their own choices instead of a lack of resources from the government.

Taylor then explains the concept of “color blindness” and how politicians use it to avoid accepting racism. To accept America as a “color blind” country, one would need to assume that where racial insults are lacking, racism itself is lacking. Color blindness ignores racial discrimination through actions. Politicians that believe this idea argue that people only receive what they deserve; instead of recognizing racism as a reason why Black unemployment is much higher than White unemployment, they run on the platform that Blacks are simply lazy and take advantage of welfare. Following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, many people believed (and still believe) that Blacks should be free of feeling discriminated against. In a perfect world, this would be the case, but in reality, it is far from it. This idea assumes that Blacks contribute to their own problems and that hard work is the means to success no matter the other factors of life that one may endure.

Finally, Taylor believes that the most prominent argument that racism is no longer prevalent in society is an increased amount of Black elected officials. This is what she refers to as “Black Faces in High Places.” Despite Baltimore, Maryland’s Black political establishment, cases of police brutality still occur, such as the case of Freddie Gray. Though he was innocent and unarmed, Gray was shot by a police officer. The mayor and police commissioner of Baltimore are both Black, as well as the judge, some of the other police officers, and the prosecutor of Gray’s case. Unfortunately, this did not result in justice for Freddie Gray.

The government has slowly created a Black middle class, and from that middle class arose Black elected officials. Many of these officials run on a platform of change and assistance for Blacks, but when they come to office, they realize that they do not have the necessary resources to do as they promised. Black elected officials are also afraid that they may lose power and status if they devote themselves to helping Blacks without doing anything for Whites. If they only help one race, their actions could be seen as reverse racism. Many people argue that since there are Blacks in power, Blacks do not have any reason to feel they are being discriminated against. Barack Obama, the first Black president, ran his campaign as a social movement, but when he was in office he was quite different; likely for the same reasons as other elected Black officials. While the arguments made by those who denounce racism could not be farther from the truth, they are still being widely accepted.

Taylor argues that blacks are typically overrepresented in poor neighborhoods. Though many Whites are also impoverished, the face of poverty has been Blacks for quite some time. This means that Blacks are constantly targeted by police. Black Lives Matter is a protest of unfair treatment and police brutality in America. America presents itself as multicultural, but Blacks are unable to live without discrimination, which contradicts that idea completely. Though the movement is not funded, it has shown remarkable resilience. When Blacks are treated unfairly in any way, the movement emphasizes it as an opportunity to advocate for change. Blacks want to be a part of the American family, but endure unfair treatment that prevents that from happening. While the movement itself will not likely be the means of Black liberation, it is a start in drawing attention to inequality and the false advertising of a multicultural America where everyone lives the “American dream.”

While the book was effective in presenting facts and studies as evidence of clear discrimination against Blacks, a reader may find it difficult to feel sympathy for this oppressed group because of the lack of personal stories. For someone who may not be interested or emotionally moved by statistics, the ideas presented in this book might not be as strong as a book like *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*. The book was quite dense, which made it challenging to read. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* argues important and compelling hardships that Blacks face in America and is certainly relevant to American studies in its challenge of multiculturalism and the American Dream, but it was not effective in influencing a reader emotionally.

Though the two books discuss the oppression that two different groups face in America, they are similar. Both books both argue that America is not as multicultural as it presents itself to be. Multiculturalism means that people of all cultures are free to live and that all cultures are accepted. *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* challenges multiculturalism in telling stories of religious and social discrimination that Arabs face daily and *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* disputes multiculturalism in its extensive statistics and evidence that show racial discrimination against Blacks. Both books also discuss the American Dream. Even when someone of a different culture is living the “textbook version” of the American Dream, they may not be satisfied. If this is the case, it is not really a universal dream. The widely accepted version of the American Dream also means that people come to America to be free of oppression, but when groups that have been in America for hundreds of years are oppressed, the idea of the American Dream may need to be revisited. Despite different structures and means of presenting information, both books argue against the same ideas.

In a society that is growing tired of racial discrimination, *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* and *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* are timely. If one wants to learn more about how different cultures are discriminated against unconsciously, these books are highly recommended. America's problems are constantly emphasized through books such as these, and this is important because if problems are not recognized, they will not be resolved. Both books are interesting and thought-provoking, and closely tie into American Studies.

Works Cited

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