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### Lights, Cameras... Affirmative Action?

It is a Friday night, and everyone is out at a new restaurant that critics have been raving about. The place is packed from open to close while people enjoy good food, drinks, and each other. Everyone goes home and goes about their lives. Despite having been at the exact same place, at the same time, doing about the same thing each and every person will have had a vastly different experience that night. No two stories about opening night will be the same. How could this be? There are many factors that affect how a person navigates the world. It begins with subtle things like choice in clothing, hairstyles, or body modifications like tattoos or piercings. However, then things move into aspects that can't necessarily be controlled or altered. Perceived gender affects the way that a person is treated, and arguably even paid in the workforce. Outward appearance or affiliations with particular social or cultural groups create expectations around how people should be or act. These expectations carry a list of stereotypes, negative or otherwise, associated with specific groups are perpetuated in mainstream media, novels, and the way that their narratives are shared. Ethnocentrism exacerbates the issues, because people often fail to see others from an unbiased perspective. Viewing others through a lens of self-superiority prevents a person from being able to see others from a different viewpoint. People who believe that they are not judgmental or discriminatory justify their actions towards marginalized or minority groups because they are viewed as less than. Seeing minorities as nothing more than actors playing the part of their pre-established roles in the story of life not only prevents them from writing their own script but forces them into infinite typecasting.

There is often that one role that an actor plays that prevents moviegoers from seeing them

as any other characters, regardless of how many completely different roles they play. For example, after actor Christoph Waltz played Colonel Hans Landa in the 2009 Quentin Tarantino film, *Inglorious Basterds*, he became synonymous with that wicked “Jew Hunter” villain that audiences just loved to hate. Unfortunately, the inability to separate a person from who they are as an individual from a way that they have been depicted goes beyond movies. When breaking news interrupts regular programming to notify the public of a mass shooting or act of terrorism many have the tendency to assume that the party responsible are associated with ISIS or the Muslim community. The Muslim or Middle Eastern community is so often associated with terrorism that it is forgotten that they themselves come from countries that are terrorized on a daily basis. Brandon Stanton, the author of *Humans of New York*, compiled a series of stories from refugees who have fled their home countries to escape war and terrorism. In one such story, a family shared their harrowing experience, “There is no security in Baghdad. We lived in constant fear. We started receiving text messages one day. They said: ‘Give us money, or we will burn down your house. If you tell the police, we will kill you.’ We had nobody to turn to. We are poor people... We had no money to give them... Then one night we woke up and our house was on fire. We barely escaped with the children... We sold everything we owned, and we left. We thought we’d rather die in a plastic boat than die there.” Middle Eastern individuals are portrayed as terrorists so frequently, that it has become almost “easy” to refute the notion that they can be victims of terrorism. This is one story of countless families that have had to flee their countries that have been ravaged by war and terrorism. It is forgotten that they too are human. Incredible things can happen when the time is taken to recognize similarities over differences. Fortunately, he shared a glimmer of hope when he stated, “When we got to the beach, there were people there who gave us food and a hug. A priest even gave us this carpet to pray on. He told us: ‘We have the same God.’” This priest recognized that they too pray to the same God and provided compassion as the God represented in several religions has asked His followers to

extend to others.

One can become accustomed of what to expect from their favorite restaurant or actor. However, expectations that have been made about minority groups are not typically made based off actual people within those communities, but off narratives that have been shared by majority groups. In her essay “It’s Hard Enough Being Me” Anna Lisa Raya shared the culture shock that she had experienced after leaving her majority Mexican neighborhood in LA to college which was much more diverse. Upon entering college what Raya had found was that identifying as Mexican was not satisfactory for her peers who felt that she needed to identify herself properly, and the identity that she needed to adhere to was Latino. “I’ve discovered that many Latinos like myself have undergone similar experiences. We face discrimination for being a minority in this country while also facing criticism for being “whitewashed” or “sellouts” in the countries of our heritage. But as an ethnic group in college, we are forced to define ourselves according to some vague, generalized Latino experience. This requires us to know our history, our language, our music, and our religion.” (Raya 122) Raya provided a personal perspective of how she has been forced to identify in a particular way. What does it mean to be a true Latino? Can this be achievable when she is not entirely sure what that looks like or if this does not feel authentic to who she feels that she is? She also notes that this is disappointingly a shared experience with others who are “Latino”. Raya struggled to meet the expectations imposed on her by others noting frustration with her parents for not teaching how her to speak Spanish. She also noted that even if she did have the ability to speak Spanish that she would have been subject to the “deep-rooted antagonism and dislike for those of us who were raised on the other side of the border.” (Raya 123) When she felt that perhaps there was no winning in this war of identity, she was given some advice from a Nuyorican writer that freed her from the box that others were attempting to put her in and she told Raya, “Because people will always complain about what you are doing – you’re a ‘gringa’ or a ‘spic’ no matter what” she explained. “So you might as

well do things for yourself and not for them.” (Raya 123) In the end, the stories of minorities are theirs to share and they have the power to seize onto identity autonomy.

Outside of unreasonable expectations, sweeping generalizations about minority groups also diminishes the level of multiplicities found in minority groups. In an essay by Ronald Takaki titled "The Harmful Myth of Asian Superiority." Takaki pointed out a very important consequence of overgeneralizations about entire minority groups. He states, “Asian Americans have been described in the media as ‘excessively, even provocatively’ successful in gaining admission to universities. Asian American shopkeepers have been congratulated, as well as criticized, for the ubiquity and entrepreneurial effectiveness. If Asian Americans can make it, many politicians and pundits ask why can’t African Americans?” (Takaki 124) The critical takeaway from Takaki’s statement is that people within minority groups will be diverse. Some will be incredibly successful while others will consistently struggle to put food on the table and keep clothes on their backs. Another significant assertion made by Takaki is the lower incomes found in minority households are due in part to roadblocks for higher paying jobs because of language barriers, lack of education, or lack of a documented status. “Most immigrants coming into Chinatown with a language barrier cannot go outside this confined area into the mainstream of American industry,” a Chinese Immigrant said. “Before, I was a painter in Hong Kong, but I can’t do it here. I got no license, no education. I want a living; so it’s dishwasher, janitor, or cook.” (Takaki 125) The prominent message of Takaki’s writing is this, “Most Asian Americans know their “success” is largely a myth. They also see how the celebration of Asian Americans as a “model minority” perpetuates their inequality...” (Takaki 125) Highlighting the “success” while ignoring the amount of sacrifices that are made to obtain life’s small victories serves as an absolute disservice to these communities.

In conclusion, these stories serve as a reminder to allow minorities the space to claim their own identities. It is not the role of the majority to determine how each person should be

portrayed based on personal expectations, stereotypes, or generalizations. Without question people deserve the respect and dignity necessary to exist as exactly this, an individual. Every person should be able to be themselves and not feel that they have to play a part in somebody else's storyline.

Essay 2 Works Cited

Raya, Anna Lisa. "It's Hard Enough Being Me." *Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Eds. Sylvan Barnet, Hugo Bedau, and John O'Hara. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017. 122-124. Print.

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