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## Essay 2

Stereotypes exist in nearly all walks of life. These ideas are so ubiquitous that they become a barrier between the fact and fiction of these groups of people. Even when the expectation of a certain group of people is positive, it prevents them from being seen as they truly exist; Ronald Takaki argues this is the case for Asian Americans. Refugees face these stereotypes as well, and face a horde of negative response and belief as a result. Cultural expectations and stereotypes, whether negative or positive, ultimately result in the false image of a singular people and objectified person.

We have a tendency to not be able to understand other people through observation, even if we're looking at ourselves. In the article, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," by Horace Miner, we do just that. Miner presents an anthropological observation of a group of people known as the Nacirema, detailing many different kinds of rituals and exposing an obsessive nature in these people. He describes a tradition that might be construed as primitive, ritualistic, and archaic; and it's a tradition that belongs to the reader - as "Nacirema" is just an inversion of the word "American." The stereotype presented here is the idea that "Western culture" is the hallmark of modernity, and has moved past all kinds of barbarism into an advanced position, at the top of the hierarchy. Miner's text asserts that when the presentation of this culture is modified slightly, the culture can be viewed as if it were foreign to the reader. In this way, American culture too could be deemed primitive and obsessive, as evidenced by the Nacirema's

pilgrimage to the “holy-mouth-man once or twice a year... despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay”(Miner 3). All of the rituals that the Nacirema engage in are posed as futile attempts to gain social favor or maintain beauty and youth. Pointing this out in an objective, anthropological approach aims to elicit this response and revelation from the reader. As Americans go to the dentist to clean and alter the appearance of their teeth, which can contribute to damaged, rather than healthy, teeth; they take precautions in vain. Reading about the Nacirema unknowingly provides a glimpse into how unfamiliar cultures are perceived, especially when they are looked down upon as inferior. The stereotype of Western culture, and more specifically American culture results in an altered worldview, with an apprehension to grant equality to cultures that appear to be less civilized. Many times, refugees are viewed in this light, and some Americans maintain the belief that refugees are a danger to their way of life.

Around the world, the prevailing cultural expectations of refugees has not been positive, and most people have not been welcomed or offered aid because of this. Brandon Stanton created a website called *Humans of New York: Refugee Stories* detailing different stories that refugees shared when talking to Stanton. Many of the stereotypes surrounding refugees are centered around their potential danger to other people. Sometimes they are seen as a possible threat to the safety of citizens, and sometimes seen as a threat to the people's way of life. One story shared in *Humans of New York* was of an interpreter who had traveled from Turkey to Greece; after crossing the border, his family was discovered by the police, who then beat them and “treated them like animals” (Humans of New York). Refugees are associated with the expectation that they are dangerous, and this has even led police to treat and believe that these people were inhuman. Unfortunately, this false image does not just apply to this single group, they are all marginalized under this wildly dangerous impression, and lack of exposure to actual refugees

threatens to keep this line of thought in place. Another story shared in *Humans of New York* was of a woman and her husband who had saved a large sum of money to pay a smuggler to take them out of the country on his boat. The conditions were very dangerous for all those on board: being overpacked with “152” people, “waves [coming] into the boat” because it was so full of people and their luggage, and then hitting “[hitting] a rock” which began to fill the boat with water. In the process, the refugee was able to make it out alive and was found by a boat, but “they never found [her] husband” (*Humans of New York*). This refugee had risked her life in a desperate attempt to escape the fear she faced in her home country, only to be taken advantage of and to lose her husband in the process. This is a telling example of the treatment of refugees, as they are forced to undergo such dangerous conditions and have no power to change how they’re taken advantage of. Again, refugees are expected to be and behave as less than human, having little value and deserving no help from others. Stereotypes like this threaten the lives of so many powerless refugees around the world. Had these cultural firewalls not been put up in fear of each other, we would be moving closer to accepting each other and moving towards the greatest common good. While these stereotypes are negative, some may be viewed as “positive,” speaking to the success and triumph of a group over others.

Within American culture, there is a longstanding hierarchy placed amongst minority groups, with Asian Americans consistently being labeled the “model.” Ronald Takaki argues that the “model minority image homogenizes Asian Americans” and only presents them as hard-working and fiscally successful, emphasizing only those who have succeeded and casting away those who are deemed otherwise. He states that the position of “model minority” has led to antagonism between Asian Americans and African Americans; when politicians in the majority ask “if Asian Americans can make it... why can’t African Americans?” (Takaki 124). This

stereotype effectively does two things: prevents people from distinguishing the myth of how Asian Americans are supposed to behave and how they actually exist, and diminishes the African American experience and struggle, as “the victims are blamed for their plight”(124). Takaki also presents the statistic that Laos refugees “have unemployment rates that reach as high as 80 percent,” definitely not a standard of success for a minority group, and certainly due to the hardship that the group faces as a whole. He also poses that in spite of “Japanese American men...[earning] an average income comparable to Caucasian men in 1980,” they had to work much harder to do so, and would also face much less opportunities to enter management-level positions. The model minority is still expected by mainstream American culture to be below the majority in terms of success, and are thus not considered as truly equal to the majority group. Though some think the “model minority” label to be a positive one, which is representative of some members’ efforts to raise their social rank and status above others due to a sort of persistence and drive, its credibility is largely exaggerated and its effect on all minority groups is inherently negative and divisive.

Takaki, Stanton, and Miner illustrate the dangers present in cultural expectations and stereotypes, and the negative impacts that this can have on other people, whether it is your own worldview, refugees, or minorities. Endorsing ethnocentrism as a methodology for the mainstream social culture is irresponsible; it promotes isolation and selfishness instead of acceptance of others. Though these stereotypes are present, and very powerful in nature, confronting them reduces their ability to obscure the truth.

#### Works Cited

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