

SECTION 4: DEVELOPING IDENTITY

I find that sometimes people from your race are the ones that put you down because you're a little different from them.

WILLIAM T. MONROE, JR.

Instructor: Nina Ahn

SOCIAL LABELING

“Boy, you should put that body to use and play some sports.” Throughout high school, people have told me I should play sports. While riding public transportation, I was often asked, “Do you play basketball?” I’d tell them that I did not play any sports and their expressions would change, as if they had a suspicion that I was not telling the truth. I used to wonder, why basketball? Then I realized I was being racially profiled. Society has a way of creating different stereotypes and racial profiles. This is not to say that people with misperceptions of an ethnic group are bad, but to comment on the ridiculousness of racial stereotypes. These ideas shape our world and cause people to develop misperceptions regarding someone they may have only known for a few seconds. People miss out on opportunities, get into sketchy situations, and are frowned upon because of these misperceptions. This is shown in Nella Larsen’s short novel, *Passing*, and Brent Staples’ essay, “Black Men and Public Space.”

In *Passing*, Irene and Clare are treated as respectable women because people believe that they are Caucasian. Clare and Irene do not correct these people because if people knew their racial background, they would be treated like dirt. During her first meeting with Clare’s husband, Jack Bellow, Irene sees the dark and evil perception that he has of African Americans. Although Mr. Bellow has never met any African Americans on a personal level (to his knowledge), he rants with hatred for them, stating things like, “I read about them in the papers. Always robbing and killing. And...worse” (Larsen 30). How can someone with so little knowledge of African Americans say such evil and hateful things? On the one hand, Mr. Bellow claims he is proud to never have known any African Americans and wants nothing to do with them. On the other hand, Mr. Bellow’s wife, Clare, is African American and he regards her as the perfect wife. This shows that Mr. Bellow’s opinion of African Americans is solely based on what he reads in the newspaper and what people tell him. Basically, his opinion is shaped by the way society portrays African Americans.



SOCIAL LABELING

In “Black Men and Public Space,” Staples is seen as a criminal and a potential threat because of his skin color, facial features, and clothing. In the beginning of Staples’ essay, he chooses to use the phrase, “My first victim” (314). I believe that Staples uses this phrase to show sarcasm—to give an outsider’s perception of his character. While Staples is out for a walk in Hyde Park, he notices a woman ahead of him walking quickly with her head down. As Staples continues to walk, he notices the woman moving more and more quickly. Finally, she starts running. This shows that her fear is a result of racial profiling. Many Americans assume that a black man walking behind them at a late hour is a sign of danger. This is because society portrays African American men—and men from some other ethnic groups—as violent, dangerous, and angry. Society uses that fear to brainwash people into believing that we should fear, avoid, or ignore certain ethnic groups.

I happen to sympathize with Staples, perhaps because I have been in his situation before. I have noticed that a lot of people avoid walking next to me in small areas at late hours and sometimes take a different route or cross the street when they see me. I have also noticed that, while walking, most people avoid making eye contact with me. Although this may seem insignificant to some people, I find this very troubling. What is it that people see in me that makes them so afraid?

In “Black Men and Public Space,” Staples goes into a jewelry store to kill time before one of his interviews. As he looks around, the proprietor excuses herself and she shortly returns with an enormous red Doberman pinscher. She stands silently, as if she has become mute, her eyes protruding in Staples’ direction. Staples, wanting to avoid trouble, leaves, bidding the proprietor farewell. I’m of two minds about the proprietor’s actions. On the one hand, I agree that safety and precaution are both important. On the other hand, I’m not sure if her actions are acceptable. It is highly annoying when people imply, through their actions, that you are a thief. During my ninth-grade year, I was suspected of stealing and was followed through a store. I was at 7-Eleven, looking for something to buy for lunch. I noticed the manager talking to the store clerk, and shortly after, I noticed the clerk following me, at a distance, of course. After a few minutes, I put back whatever I was going to buy. I decided that if they did not value my business enough to not suspect me of thievery, I would not do business with them.

In “Should I Act More Black?” Ashley Benn comments on her experiences with misperceptions and racial profiling in high school and in college. During high school, Benn was labeled as “Oreo,” “bougie,” or “whitey” because

she was not loud or obnoxious, and wanted to pursue a higher education. Since Benn was friendly with a white crowd, most of the African Americans that went to her school verbally disowned her by telling her she was not black, but white-washed. They also believed that Benn thought she was too good to hang out with other African Americans. You would think that it is common for races to stick together but I find that sometimes people from your race are the ones that put you down because you're a little different from them. Is it not black to speak properly, to want a better life for yourself, or to want to wait before having children?

Society has created an image that portrays African Americans as lazy, mischievous, loud, and uneducated. So when an African American steps out of this image, some people say negative side comments to tell them that they do not belong. Benn feels insecure because her boyfriend and her family make fun of the way she talks, calling her "Almond Joy" or their "white cousin." Although they are joking and do not mean what they say, Benn still feels hurt and insulted. It has become common today to dismiss a person's individuality and label them as bizarre because we find them to be too different from ourselves. When people have a negative perception of someone, they tend to show it through their actions and body language. Benn recalls an incident when she was younger. She was walking with her dad in a 7-Eleven and the store worker followed them throughout the store. Through his actions, the store worker told them, "I think you are going to steal." Another incident that Benn recalls in her essay was when her brother was driving their mom's Chrysler 300 and two white cops followed them home. Many people assume that if a person looks underprivileged and he/she has something that is rather expensive, he/she must have stolen it. Even the people who have sworn to protect and uphold the law are influenced by society's labels.

I feel that one of the main causes of racial profiling and misperceptions is the social labeling that goes on in grade schools. Within these schools, students constantly label each other. Whether it is a positive or negative label is not the issue I'm addressing, it's the act of labeling. Students pick up the habit of labeling and then carry it throughout their lives. In "Se Habla Espanol," Tanya Barrientos talks about her experiences being a Hispanic who is bilingual but more fluent in English. She recalls an incident when she was checking into grade school. Tanya and her mother were running somewhat late to registration, and when they got there, the registrar frowned and said, "You people. Your children are always behind, and you have the nerve to bring them late?" This shows that the registrar thinks Hispanics are slow and do not



SOCIAL LABELING

have academic proficiency. Although statistics may show that in some states, like California, Hispanics have lower grade point averages than other ethnic groups, what gives her the right to make such a prejudiced statement?

People cast judgments on others because of stereotypes and misperceptions. These misleading perceptions cause innocent people to be frowned upon as if they are criminals or something is wrong with them. People believe these perceptions because it is easier. Rather than getting to know people on a personal level before judging them, we subconsciously outfit people with ideas of what they might be like. This is wrong, and we are all guilty.

Works Cited

- Barrientos, Tanya. "Se Habla Espanlo." *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*. Ed. Richard Bullock. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.
- Benn, Ashley. "Should I Act More Black?" *New Voices: A Collection of Student Essays*. Eds. Sandra Jackson and Amy Reynolds. Plymouth: Hayden-McNeil, 2011. 23–25. Print.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. Print.
- Staples, Brent. "Black Men and Public Space." *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*. Eds. Linda H. Peterson, John C. Brereton, Joseph Bizup, Anne E. Fernald, and Melissa A. Goldwaithe. 13th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. 314–316. Print.