Who is a 'Person of Color?'

Nadia Al-Yagout, Undergraduate Student, *Humboldt State University*

I live in a culture that has always reassured me of my "whiteness" and that being half-Arab American would be a false, shameful misconception of my identity. I grew up convinced the only reason my name sounded unique or that my physical attributions varied from my white classmates was due to the fact that my father was Arab, and that he was the only one allowed to identify himself as such. I live in a society that regularly dissects and labels my identity in ways convenient for them—a society where the U.S. Census is just now currently debating whether or not to classify Arabs, Middle Easterners, or North Africans as their own racial reporting category, so we are freed from being funneled into the "white" category on federal reports. I live in a world that divides and racializes (Shiloh 2015) Arab-Americans as either ordinary white Americans or perpetual foreigners, devoutly committed to their ancestral countries rather than the United States. There are two master narratives surrounding Arab identities— either that Arabs are fully adapted to white, American culture or that Arabs will never conform, and therefore, are often targeted, ostracized, or invisible. Either way, there is always a need to define or justify our cultures, communities, or racial identities to the rest of society.

We have been conditioned to illustrate race as a black/white dichotomy; and this idea is a paradigm (Way 2011) widely accepted in our society. My racial identity, like countless others, has been institutionally sculpted through this framework. In modern institutions like my university, the rhetoric around race is allocated into two categories: "white" versus "people of color," an extension of the black/white paradigm. Concerns and challenges we Arab-American students face are rarely at the forefront of discussion and this often leads to us feeling disconnected from our campus communities. Since Arab students are routinely ignored, we are caught in the middle of the paradigm, not knowing where to fit in or how to identify ourselves.

This is a battle I have unknowingly been fighting since I was a little girl. When I was in elementary school, I brought a photo of my grandmother Hutham to show-and-tell; my classmates realized her name rhymed with "Saddam," then proceeded to mock her by collectively chanting "Hutham Hussein" while my teacher half-heartedly tried to stop them. During my sixth grade STAR test (the first year where students fill out their own demographic information), I was discontented when I tried to fill out the racial category and could not find an Arab-American option. I approached my teacher with my confusion and she immediately consoled me to fill in the white bubble. Throughout grade school I wanted desperately to fit in that I often asked my friends to refrain from sharing my last name with others. I was embarrassed how different it sounded, and it was often used as a catalyst for people to treat me differently. These are small, habitual experiences in my life that I have often discounted as unimportant or circumstantial; situations that have had a powerful impact on the way I viewed and identified myself growing up. From a young age, a copious amount of people in my life, including my family, convinced me to identify myself as white, because being Arab was insignificant or, in some ways, fictional. I have always been

uncertain of where I fit in or how I should identify myself, and I know this is a feeling that many other Arab-Americans have faced growing up in American institutions. The idea of cognitive dissonance permeates through Arab communities, because while we are "caucused" as white, our levels of acceptance and personal experiences often differ from those who self-identify as white.

Conformity plays a key role in how our society identifies people in the United States; we assign various values to different bodies based on nationalistic assumptions we have about subcultures or groups of people. The United States also experiences cognitive dissonance within its ideologies—on one hand, we are an extremely ethnocentric society with narrow definitions of "normal" but, on the other hand, we see conformity as negative. We are encouraged to push ourselves outside of conformity if we are paving our way to meet the normalizations of society; whereas people who do not conform to the cultural identities of American society are labeled as subordinate and are ostracized from the rest of society. Therefore, conformity is also linked to the predominant discourse and analysis surrounding race—and how our society views race through a binary lens. Arab-Americans' identities are often caught between the dichotomy; many live with a feeling of uncertainty and an inability to define themselves. Our identities are predetermined by the society we live in—because while we are institutionally seen as white, many of our cultures do not conform to the standardized American culture.

The racial binary is problematic, because it only gives power to those at the forefront of the dichotomy. We exercise the term "people of color" with sheer recognition for those whose identities are not constructed within the binary; and without listening to the intersectional histories, concerns, and presences of other racial groups, we are merely reassuring the racial dichotomy. This ideology hinders many racial populations, like Arab-Americans, from actively having a voice and participating in racial

discourse, especially on a campus that still participates in a binary structure. While my university may be actively trying to build an inclusive campus, it is critical to examine the challenges surrounding their steps of action. The university has created Academic Excellence Centers for African Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans—all of which are important safe spaces for students who are often institutionally targeted, marginalized, or forgotten. The goals of these centers include supporting overall academic success while incorporating cultural ties. The institution may have created academic centers for certain racial groups, but their lists are not exhaustive. We cannot clump several diverse populations into a single "people of color" category without recognizing how problematic that is for the voices that are still silenced within the group. Races and ethnicities that exist outside of the paradigm are frequently invisible, and the binary is another process to further the marginalization that occurs within racial communities. "People of color" is supposed to be a firm, powerful umbrella term for those who do not racially identify as white, but there are too many races forgotten in this process. Therefore, students like me are often left questioning where we belong, and the institution has the power to define us without much resistance.

Through the invisibility of Arabs on campus, my university has reinforced the idea that Arabs are still subjected to the black/white paradigm. Arab students are constantly profiled as "people of color," but at the same time, we are generally not significant enough to receive recognition on campus. Our school has yet to provide resources specifically for Arab students, leaving many feeling detached from campus culture, inclusion, and engaging in racially related discussions on campus. We are offered one newly adopted history course about the Middle East's modern history, one two-day, upper-division French course that focuses on Arabic cultural activities, and an institution that is constantly demographically representing us as white. My

institution does not classify Arab students as their own racial category—instead, we are bundled with white students, even though our racial experiences are generally more complex. Our population is not adequately represented within an inclusive framework on campus, and we are seldom noticed. Arab students are kind of in limbo between the black/white paradigm, repeatedly perplexed at the way institutions like mine choose to acknowledge our cultures, communities, and experiences.

As I have gotten older, I am able to see these recurring themes at many institutions like my university. It is highly ineffective to divide "people of color" into one sub-group; because while the institution claims to be committed to dismantling racism, they are nurturing the false dichotomy of race, perpetuating issues that racial groups like Arab-Americans have been experiencing for decades. The racial binary preserves the idea that races outside of the binary are negligible, insignificant, or unimportant. Many students are slipping through the cracks on this campus, and therefore, we need to collectively recognize that race is a complex concept that exists outside of the black/white paradigm, we need to re-examine our definition of "people of color" to be more exhaustive and inclusive, and we need to value the perspectives and contributions brought forth by each underrepresented community equally.

_____

Nadia Al-Yagout is an undergraduate student in the Criminology and Justice Studies program at Humboldt State University. The purpose of her research is to examine the intersectional depth of Arab American voices in the current educational and political climate. As a daughter of a Kuwaiti immigrant, she believes that highlighting underrepresented voices will lead to the progression of our society's collective consciousness surrounding identity. Nadia's other research interests include global health and conflict resolution.

_____

References

Shiloh, Whitney. 2015. "The Affective Forces of Racialization" *Knowledge Cultures* 3(1):45–64.

Way, Brad K. 2011. "Kuhn and the Discovery of Paradigms." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences.* 41(3):380-397.