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Seeing Beyond Stereotypes

One of the many pervasive societal issues that Warren St. John addresses in his book, *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman’s Quest to Make a Difference*, is the complex nature of stereotypes and how they can skew one’s perspective. St. John reveals that stereotypes are not just a one-sided issue: preconceived notions about certain nationalities and ethnic and religious groups exist not only among the original Clarkston residents, but also within the diverse refugee community that seemed to arise overnight in the Southern town. Both the white American citizens and the multi-ethnic refugee population found themselves thrust into a world full of unknowns, and this is one of the major reasons that each respective group began to file individuals of a particular race, nationality, or religion under labels. Amid the melee of various misunderstandings and scuffles was Mayor Lee Swaney, with both personal and political agendas that complicated his position on the refugees’ presence, and Luma Mufleh, a woman determined to unite a disjointed group of young boys into a disciplined soccer team that would become known as the Fugees. By explaining the complex circumstances and exploring the diverse perspectives of several of the people involved in this multifaceted matter, St. John’s *Outcasts United* reveals that the story of Clarkston is, to some extent, a microcosm of society as a whole. To explore the larger role stereotypes play in our lives, we must understand why people turn to stereotypes in the first place, how certain labels applied to or held by specific groups can determine individuals’ decisions, and how failing to remain cognizant of the fact that stereotypes do not define every individual within a particular population leads to societal conflict.

However much we may dislike it, stereotyping is in our nature. In the past, when our more primitive ancestors had to make split second decisions, being able to quickly classify someone or something as a potential threat was essential to survival. Although the way that we form stereotypes
today does not follow this psychology exactly, the primitive mindset of our predecessors still exists within us to some extent. This natural inclination is amplified by the fact that some of the labels associated with certain groups today have existed for years; essentially, some generalizations have long been deeply embedded in the societal mind because a strong history precedes them. Mayor Swaney was a city council member of “old Clarkston,” meaning Clarkston as it existed prior to the advent of the refugees, and in 2001 he ran as mayor on the platform of attracting an “old-fashioned American hamburger joint to open up within the city limits” (St. John 41-42). His political platform reflects his belief that maintaining the walls of the comfort zone was essential to the survival of Clarkston as it once was; he and his constituents envisioned a Clarkston that would remain pristine in its uniformity, immune to the waves of change. Yet this vision of a Clarkston resistant to outside forces was shattered by news of a plan to bring in seven hundred Somali Bantu, prompting the organization of a town meeting that ultimately came to no avail (St. John 44). The town simply was not prepared for the haphazard method of resettlement that the voluntary agencies had utilized, and this lack of preparation led the Clarkston residents to resent the presence of the refugees, setting the stage for the inception of stereotypes.

The reaction the Clarkston natives had to the refugees reflects our predisposition to fear anything that is not familiar to us—anything that disrupts the patterns we’re accustomed to seeing is often perceived as a threat. The reverse of this statement is true as well, for a perpetual pattern we notice among a particular group can lead us to stereotype. Both subconscious methods of stereotyping often involve the association of physical characteristics with specific behavioral or personality traits. The most prominent example of stereotyping based on a seemingly prevalent pattern is that of the African refugees’ view of black Americans, a group whose voice is notably absent from the story. African mothers such as Beatrice Ziaty did not want their boys to get their hair braided because, as St. John explains, they “associated braids with black Americans, whom many African refugees further
associated with Clarkston’s street gangs” (St. John 111). These street gangs are then further, and	rightly, associated with violence and even death, two things that all of the refugees had sought to
escape by coming to America. This linear manner of stereotyping is entirely based on observing a
behavior that appears common among a group of individuals with some identifiable physical
characteristic. Additionally, in the same way that the Clarkston residents constructed stereotypes
about the refugees based on their own cultural values, some of the African refugees further validated
their generalizations about black Americans based on traditions valued in their respective countries:
“Respectable African men, Beatrice believed, wore their hair short and neatly trimmed” (St. John
111).

St. John gains insight from so many individuals from different populations, but, with the
exception of Tony J. Scipio, the police chief appointed by Swaney, there is no exploration of the
black American community that is stereotyped by individuals such as Beatrice within the refugee
community as well as by white Americans. Stereotypes within and about the Afro-American
community have always been quite complicated, and, I, as a black American, have seen how some of
the individuals within the community enable the stereotypes themselves. I have actually been slighted
by other black people, even friends, for being too “white.” By that, I learned, they meant that I spoke
grammatically correct English, which was a very confusing statement to me because it would never
occur to me that only white people were capable of speaking properly. Their statement regarding the
way I speak suggested that they viewed being “white” as a negative trait since they referred to me as
such in the form of an insult, and it also indicated that they had apparently never heard another black
person speak English properly. Essentially, these particular black Americans were, of their own
accord, perpetuating the stereotype of black Americans speaking poor, slang-filled English. We still
live in a somewhat segregated society, so there are some people who have only seen certain ethnic
populations in a specific context—sometimes a rather negative one. Consequently, it is possible that
the self-perpetuation of stereotypes may lead people outside of the group of individuals embodying the stereotype to more readily assume that the majority of individuals that fit the ethnic profile will act in a similar manner.

As a result of my personal experiences, I feel obligated to remain cognizant of the generalizations made by others because I want others to see that such narrow views do not truly define individual black Americans. Since I do not enable the stereotypes surrounding the black American community through my behavior, I cannot be defined in terms of them. However, because people form and adhere to stereotypes based on their personal backgrounds and their experiences, they may continue to arrive at conclusions about individuals or act based on these misguided preconceived notions. The relationship between individuals’ personal experiences and their perspectives of others is clearly seen in the case of Luma and Mayor Swaney. Although their very different backgrounds certainly led them to view the refugees quite differently, it is important to note that Luma and Swaney both shared the fact that they reacted directly to the stereotypes held by the original citizens of Clarkston and the refugees themselves. However, the motivation behind their actions was the point where the commonality parted and set them on two very different, yet inevitably intertwined courses.

Luma, in contrast to Swaney, was able to empathize with the refugee community quite easily for several reasons. After moving to America, her father in Jordan severed all communication with her, so her grandmother became her only link to home; because she had to make a living for herself in a country where she had no family, Luma felt quite alone, and then when her grandmother died, Luma was completely isolated from her family (St. John 23). Luma was, like the refugees, a pariah who was struggling to get by in a society quite different from her country of origin. Because Luma was able to personally relate to the refugees as individuals, she was also able to clearly see and understand many of the stereotypes the refugees had about other populations. For instance, because of the feelings
many African refugees had towards American boys with braided hair, Luma created a strict rule for her teams stating that boys must have short hair (St. John 111). Luma acted based on this stereotype because she realized that if she wanted the mothers of her players to be supportive of the team, she in turn had to uphold some of their personal beliefs so they didn’t feel their authority was being undermined by Luma’s position as coach. Ironically, Luma’s decision regarding hair stemmed not only from her understanding of the refugees’ cultures, but also from her knowledge of American society. The rival teams they would be facing from suburban and rural areas outside of Atlanta already held certain preconceived notions about the Fugees simply based on their accents and names, and she didn’t want them to form more stereotypes based on hairstyles they too associated with gangs (St. John 111). Luma also made decisions that prevented ethnic and religious tensions among the refugee community from penetrating her team. She was always looking out for potential cliques made up of boys who shared the same language or country of origin, and she would organize groups so that the boys worked with team members of different nationalities; she spoke to all the players in English when on the field; and she forbade players from speaking to one another in their native languages (St. John 76). Through her determination to unite young boys whose lives were in disarray, she provided a refuge where these alienated boys could simultaneously become part of a much larger community and discover their own personal identities.

Luma was in a very unique position despite being an “outsider” to Clarkston because she had a much more comprehensive understanding of both the refugee community and the Clarkston community. Given this advantage, Luma was able to reach out to the Clarkston community in a way that the longtime residents could appreciate. For instance, when she wanted permission to use Armistead Field for the Fugees’ practices, she decided to attend one of Clarkston’s monthly city council meetings to present her case, a decision on her part that displayed her willingness to cooperate with the citizens of Clarkston in a context they were familiar with (St. John 193-194). Prior to the city
council meeting, Swaney had stated that nothing but baseball would be played on the field, and that the “big guys,” in Swaney’s words, would not be allowed to play soccer on the field because their cleats could ruin it (St. John 189). Luma, understanding the way that Clarkston residents preferred to settle matters, attended the city council meeting to request permission in spite of Swaney’s public statement. Thus, she displayed her genuine willingness to work within the system that “old” Clarkston was accustomed to in order to arrive at a decision determined democratically by the city council members. Luma wanted to cooperate with the Clarkston residents for the sake of the Fugees to come to a clear agreement despite the risk of the agreement being rather unfair as a result of prejudices held by some residents. Essentially, Luma’s decision to settle the issue in a city council meeting offered Clarkston’s citizens a sense of empowerment, something that many felt had been lost with the arrival of the refugees, by granting them the liberty to choose to accept change rather than being forced to do so as a result of circumstances beyond their control.

For Swaney, the connection between soccer and the refugees was quite different, but every bit as complex, and his viewpoint was heavily influenced by his political position and personal values. St. John informs the reader in the introduction that Swaney was born in Clemson, South Carolina in 1939, a time when segregation was the norm (St. John 11). This provides a wider context in which Swaney’s actions can be analyzed and helps partially explain why it was so difficult for Swaney to understand the complexity of the refugee community. The explanations Swaney offered behind his actions were often vague and contradictory, changing each time he spoke to a different person. For instance, when interviewed by a journalist, Swaney firmly stated that he refused to allow soccer on Armistead Field, yet just prior to this interview he had simply told a young man to take the question of whether or not soccer was permitted on the field to the police chief (St. John 89-90). Swaney was fully aware that those most interested in playing soccer would be the refugees; thus, his rejection of the idea of playing soccer on a field supposedly only meant for baseball was his way of fighting
against the many changes sweeping across his city. Having been born in an area that was almost certainly sheltered by homogeneity, Swaney probably had never been put in a position where he had to step beyond the veiled world that he had grown accustomed to, a world that was disillusioned upon the penetration of a reality that could not be ignored. But Swaney was not alone in his frustration: from the perspective of the suburban residents who witnessed an overwhelming demographic shift in their once homogeneous communities, soccer was much more than just a game—it became, as St. John describes, “a conspicuous symbol of cultural change” (St John 92). Uncertain of what the repercussions of this cultural change could be, local citizens began to grow suspicious and fearful of the ethnic or religious groups that were shaping their towns, so they retreated into their homes and viewed the new populations from a safe distance, a distance that fostered the development of stereotypes.

Mayor Swaney and many of the residents of Clarkston did not seem to make a significant effort to understand the refugees. Someone who truly cares about his community should be willing to take the time to understand the people within it; otherwise, healthy social interaction cannot occur, making everyone miserable. One could argue that the refugees did not put forth a strong effort on their own part, but this argument is somewhat flawed in that it does not take into consideration the fact that the residents of Clarkston already knew American culture because it was their own; thus, they were the ones in the ideal position to initiate communication. Swaney in particular had a major responsibility to encourage his constituents to make light of the situation and learn to appreciate and respect new neighbors. Yet he, like the other Clarkston residents, incorrectly assumed that the refugees were all a single, united group of strangers; thus, as St. John explains, “when these new arrivals didn’t band together to get involved in the town, this way of thinking went, it was evidence of a collective failing by the entire refugee community” (St. John 188). Swaney never fully considered the fact that the refugees came from different countries, and that the youth within different groups
were being influenced by different factors. For instance, had Swaney known that the Liberian boys seem to be at greater risk to be recruited by gangs because of the fact that they already speak English, he could have potentially reduced the amount of crime in his city by actively advocating for programs like Luma’s soccer team that helped prevent young boys from falling prey to the lure of street gangs.

Despite his somewhat myopic views of the refugee community, Swaney did seem to have one particular moment in which he acknowledged there was at least some value in Luma’s soccer team. The city council meeting Luma attended, in many ways, proved to be a major bridge towards reciprocal cooperation between the refugee community, which in this case was represented by Luma, and the “old” Clarkston community. Approving soccer on Armistead Field was a symbolic gesture indicating that at least some residents of Clarkston were ready to acknowledge the reality before them. Swaney’s reason, as cited in the book, for permitting Luma’s team to use the field was because he felt that soccer might help “get our kids off the street,” and the mayor’s support for the measure prompted unanimous support from the council members (St. John 194). The fact that Swaney referred to the refugee youth as “our kids” is a subtle, but powerful statement, for it suggests that Clarkston, or at least Swaney personally, was beginning to accept the newcomers as being part of the community. In other words, the refugees were being viewed as part of a larger, connected society with shared interests and values despite whatever immediate cultural, ethnic, or religious differences may have existed between individuals. Swaney supported use of Armistead Field by the Fugees despite not only his prior statements regarding the field as being meant solely for baseball, but also in spite of the fact that his own wife was not an advocate for the refugees and the fact that his constituency was made up of mostly longtime residents of Clarkston, the voters who were probably the least supportive of the refugee population (St. John 188 & 194). This made his advocacy all the more poignant, for his decision to support Luma’s team could have meant political suicide for him. It is difficult to surmise what Swaney’s true intentions were, but given the fact that his decision was so politically risky, it
may very well be that he genuinely felt that perhaps it was time for Clarkston to show its willingness to accept change and perhaps even find common ground upon which both the refugees and Clarkston residents could stand.

In a social environment as diverse as Clarkston, failure to see that individuals with different backgrounds may very well share many of the same values and goals despite their differences can only lead to a stagnant, fragmented society. When thrust into unfamiliar environments, we seek refuge in what is familiar to us, which may lead us to make generalizations more quickly; however, when we eschew good judgment and allow stereotypes to guide our decisions, we permit the perpetuation of bigotry in our communities. Although it may be an instinctual inclination influenced by personal backgrounds or historical biases, stereotyping is neither an accurate, nor fair means of defining individuals. Though we may sometimes inevitably encounter situations where we interact with others based on snap judgments, we must remain diligent in suppressing initial biases and realizing that the identity of an individual is not defined by stereotypes. The story of the Fugees is part of the larger narrative of Clarkston, and Clarkston is just one chapter among many others that exist within our society, but it is certainly an inspirational account that demonstrates the power we have to overcome stereotypes and unite regardless of differences while staying true to our own personal identities.
Works Cited