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How Does It Feel To Be A Problem?

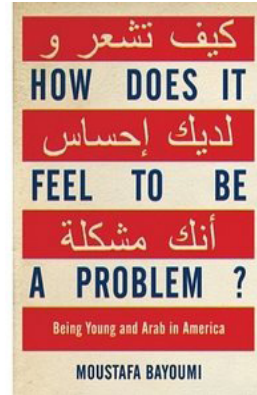
Moustafa Bayoumi: Penguin Press
(2008). ISBN: 1594201587, 304 pp.

Reviewed by ERIK LOVE

Despite some shortcomings, Moustafa Bayoumi's *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem* makes an important contribution toward understanding the brutal impact of race in the contemporary United States by using rich ethnographic data to examine the effects of discrimination and hate crimes in America. Bayoumi's research is part of a new batch of scholarship that looks at the consequences of what is (problematically) called "Islamophobia." The need to examine the impact of racialized violence and policies that have a disproportionate effect on people who fit the stereotypical description of "Muslim-looking" has become even more important in light of the post-9/11 "War on Terror."

How Does It Feel to Be A Problem asks questions about integration and exclusion similar to those asked by Genieve Abdo in *Mecca and Main Street* (2007), and he follows other excellent studies based on ethnographic, participant observation, and survey work from such scholars as Louise Cainkar (2006), Jen'nan Ghazal Read (2004), Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen Moore (2006), and Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (2008). Bayoumi's book, with its small number of detailed biographies, is perhaps most similar to Paul M. Barrett's *American Islam* (2007), but instead of interviewing prominent community leaders as Barrett did, Bayoumi instead follows "everyday people" and their all-too-representative brushes with what is now popularly referred to as "Islamophobia."

But the term "Islamophobia" isn't really an apt description of studies, like Bayoumi's, that ask predominantly Christian Arab Americans about their experiences with racialized, ostensibly anti-Islamic discrimination. Race plays a complex role in American Islamophobia – "Islamophobia" affects Christians, Sikhs, and anyone else who might fit the racialized stereotypical appearance of "Muslim." Unpacking the racialized dynamics of this phenomenon is difficult, and unlike too many scholars who overlook the racial components of Islamophobia, Bayoumi acknowledges the complexity. He doesn't attempt to write a comprehensive book about all aspects of Islamophobia. Apart from considering the vast diversity among Muslim Americans (in terms geographic, racial, class, ethnicity, nationality,



religious, etc.), any full analysis of Islamophobia would also take into account its racialized effect on diverse communities of Sikh Americans, Chaldean Americans, Arab Americans, Turkish Americans, Armenian Americans, among many others. Bayoumi admits that an ethnographic project like his would have little hope of presenting findings that adequately include experiences from all of these communities. With a nod toward the large range of communities that are swept into the Islamophobia effect, Bayoumi states that he must limit his discussion to the somewhat more “coherent and self-contained” Arab American experience in order to avoid the complications that would follow an attempt to examine the “capacious and sprawling” experience of the many Muslim American communities in Brooklyn (p. 7). Rather than make an ill-advised attempt at covering all of these communities, Bayoumi successfully centers his narratives on a specific, localized, and important community: second generation Arab Americans in Brooklyn.

With his relatively sharp focus on Arab Americans (both Muslim and Christian), Bayoumi relates intimate narratives gathered over several months of interviewing and participant observation. With clear description of minute details that make his narratives intensely and often beautifully humanizing, Bayoumi challenges the racist (and widespread) notion that anyone who traces heritage to the West Asia, North Africa, or the broader Muslim world must fit into a neat dichotomy: they’re either completely assimilated or completely fanatical. To break down this false dichotomy, Bayoumi presents a wide range of portraits – from high school students to Iraq War veterans to middle-aged parents – with careful attention to details in a way that captivates the reader and shows how these individuals confront Islamophobia in their own unique ways. Through these seven ethnographic portraits, Bayoumi deftly discusses not only heady issues of identity and religion, but he also addresses concerns about grades in school, rocky relationships, and the agony of dealing with parents who just don’t understand. And then suddenly, Islamophobia interrupts an otherwise very typical young American narrative. A recent college graduate has trouble getting a job and suspects this is because of his Muslim name. A high school student is banned from running for student government because of her religious obligations. An entire family is thrown into immigration prison:

The spring semester was under way at school, and [Rasha] had classes to attend in the morning, but for some reason sleep was a gold coin in the water just beyond her grasp....
...half an hour later, Rasha suddenly opened her eyes. A female officer was shaking her, telling her in gray, official tones to get dressed. Oh, my God, Rasha thought, somebody’s

died, and she felt her heart drop and crack. She immediately glanced over to her sister. “What the hell’s going on?” she asked, but Reem just looked frightened. Shock and fear paralyzed Rasha, and her knees locked.... Shock turned to confusion as she realized that about fifteen law enforcement officers – INS officials, U.S. Marshals, and FBI agents – had taken over their residence. (p. 20-21)

Rasha’s family was one of the untold thousands affected by mass arrests in 2002. We learn that detainees like Rasha, while held in the county jail or the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, quickly learned to work together to carefully preserve prison vegetables, pastas, and other foods. Then, the families, representing many different cultures, would combine and remake their rations into more appetizing meals. But in Bayoumi’s well-crafted narrative, the simple pleasure of sharing a meal soon gives way to horror, and we are there to cry with Rasha as she tries in vain to seek help from unsympathetic and verbally abusive guards. She pleads with them to allow her to have a doctor look at a rash that she developed from the scratchy prison blankets that feel “like sleeping under hairy cardboard” (p. 25).

The emotional detail in Bayoumi’s writing makes his portraits of Arab American life during the “War on Terror” particularly valuable. Yasmin’s story, for example, opens with a scene from 2005 where the young high school student becomes enraged by a profiling incident she witnesses on a New York City bus. Shortly after a Muslim woman, with a *hijab* and carrying her infant in a blanket, boards the bus where Yasmin is on her way to pick up some Taco Bell for her family, Yasmin overhears a couple whispering:

“What do you think she’s got under there?” the woman asked the man. “I don’t know,” he said.... They continued to talk, and Yasmin turned to look at them. *Are they for real?* she thought. *What do they think she’s got under there? A bomb?* She had to say something, so she broke into their conversation.

“It’s a baby,” she said in her signature monotone.

The couple turned their faces to her.... “But did you see it?”

...But before she could say anything, the couple had already pushed their way up to the driver, a young African-American man in a pressed polyester uniform. She could hear them command the driver to do something. (p. 84)

The bus driver then inspected the woman's baby, which was "lost in the innocence of sleep" (p. 85). Yasmin, infuriated, briefly considers calling 911 to report "*a white couple on a city bus. I think she has a bomb in her purse....* But she didn't call. In fact, she didn't do anything, and because of that she was not only angry with the people on the bus but also "annoyed with herself" (p 85).

These excerpts show how Bayoumi relates the tangled fury of emotions behind statistics collected by advocacy organizations like the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR 2008), where the number of civil rights complaints have gone up every year from 1995 until 2007 (the most recent year for which statistics are available). The most common complaints received by CAIR involve discrimination by a government agency, and reports indicate that workplaces, airports, prisons, and schools are also frequent sites of civil rights violations. CAIR and similar organizations came into existence in the second half of the twentieth century (CAIR was founded in 1994), but the racism and racialized discourses that these advocacy groups seek to combat have a much deeper history that is often ignored in many "post-9/11" discussions.

The history of race and racism involved in American Islamophobia is long and dense, and Bayoumi unfortunately obscures this history in his analysis. In framing his Arab American narratives, Bayoumi largely neglects the vast history of racialized discrimination against Arab Americans and people from North Africa, West Asia, and the broader Muslim world before 2001. Like too many analysts, Bayoumi considers his to be a study only relevant in "post-9/11," a time in which Islamophobia affects America's "newest minorities" (p. 260). But people tracing their heritage to the Arab world have been in America, dealing with discrimination at least since the 1700s – Arab Americans are hardly America's "newest minority." In his closing pages, Bayoumi finally mentions a few of the biggest examples of "pre-9/11" racism, like Operation Boulder and the LA8 (p. 264-5), but he pays little attention to explicitly racist immigration laws that were in effect until the latter half of the twentieth century – laws which have profoundly shaped the lives of Arab Americans.

Bayoumi positions his work to be about "groups virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001" (p. 3), but even a cursory look at the historical record shows that Americans were quite aware of Arab Americans and other "Muslim-looking" groups before 2001. Bayoumi's analysis thus not only neglects but obscures some very relevant history. For instance, the presence of ubiquitous racialized images of Arab American "oil sheiks" in the mid-twentieth century. He minimizes the importance of the 1980's and 90's conflation of "terrorist" so intertwined with "Arab" and "Muslim" that after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building and the loss of TWA

Flight 800, everyone from TV pundits to official government investigators worked from the (mistaken) assumption that Arabs or Muslims must have been involved. In short, Orientalism and related racialized discourses about people from North Africa, West Asia, and the broader Muslim world has a well-documented history that is unfortunately absent from Bayoumi's analysis.

By mostly overlooking this crucial history in his otherwise insightful book, Bayoumi makes W.E.B. DuBois' problem seem more epiphenomenal than it actually is. If the problem of Islamophobia really had very little history and only just began on 9/11, then perhaps Islamophobia is an aberration rather than a structural reality. In fact, the Islamophobia that Bayoumi describes has a history that is as deep as the history of the United States. People now ascribed with the label "Middle Easterner," "Arab," or "Muslim," are people who in fact might identify as Chaldean, Persian, Sikh, Turk, or any number of ethnic/national/religious groups. These groups have always had a place in the American racial hierarchy. As with most racialized groups, the nature of that place in the hierarchy along with the stereotypes affixed to it have changed over time, but the place certainly was not created on 9/11. While 2001 marks a major turning point, Bayoumi fails to describe the historical dynamic of race as it applies to the otherwise extremely valuable ethnographic narratives he provides. Since Bayoumi explicitly sets out to follow DuBois' example, by showing how historically and socially constructed forces affect the lives of racialized Americans, this shortcoming is quite glaring.

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