



How Does it Feel to be a Problem

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“How does it feel to be a problem?” Over a century ago, African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois asked this question in his classic work on race, *The Souls of Black Folk*. All people have problems, regardless of wealth or status; it’s part of the human condition. To be a problem is something altogether different. To be a problem is to have your own body, your children, your people viewed as a malignant presence in society.

DuBois foresaw that race would be the central issue of the 20th century; he could not have foreseen how deeply entrenched racism would still be in the 21st. How does it feel to be a racial minority in our day and face voter suppression laws designed to keep you away from the polls, or to hear the president declare there are “good people” among white nationalist hate groups? How does it feel to be a problem?

The #MeToo movement has drawn much-needed attention to issues of sexual abuse and assault which are experienced by one in every four women and one in six men. Even so, those who courageously come forward with their stories frequently have their pain and moral agency discounted or ignored. How does it feel to hear a senator say, “She doesn’t remember it correctly,” or a congressperson opine, “It happened a long time ago, what does it matter now?” How does it feel to be a problem?

There are now more refugees and forcibly displaced persons than at any time in recorded history—68.5 million. Even so, America is closing its doors to refugees. In the last two years the administration has cut the refugee entry goal from 110,000 to a historically low 30,000. How does it feel to go through a two-year vetting process and be promised resettlement in the U.S., only to have your flight canceled and dreams of reunion with your family shattered? How does it feel to be a problem?

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty that represent America’s highest ideals. Migrants have long come north out of Mexico and Central America to escape poverty and violence in hope of better lives. How does it feel to be an asylum-seeker and be turned away in violation of international law, or to be villainized by the president as criminals? How does it feel to be a problem?

The crown jewel of the Bill of Rights is the First Amendment, which guarantees the freedom of speech and assembly, the free exercise of religion and freedom of the press. How does it feel to be Muslim when an executive order effectively bans citizens of Muslim majority countries from entering the U.S., to be a journalist who hears the president declare the press to be an enemy of the people, or to be a participant of a peaceful protest and be accused of “mob rule”? How does it feel to be a problem?

How did DuBois respond to the question? He wrote, “I answer seldom a word.” What answers do we hear?

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