

The Other

Innocence defines itself in terms of the “Other.” Splitting off aspects of ourselves inconsistent with our self-image, we know who we are because we are not them. Why? Because *they* dress, act and speak differently, and very commonly, they engage in violence, while *we* do not (unless they provoke us). They exist on the far side of the line that determines who we are, just as the world exists on the other side of the skin that determines who “I” am. In truth, however, writes Daniel Deardorff,

Every insider carries an infernal Otherness buried deep within, and it is that hidden abyss, denied and handed off, which creates society’s Other Within. Desperately wishing to remain a “real member of the flock” the insider projects this interior darkness onto (and even into) some convenient outsider.

Historian Regina Schwartz traces “othering” to the foundation of our Judeo-Christian tradition. The Old Testament “encodes Western culture’s central myth of collective identity.” Large sections are essentially narratives that forge Hebrew identity by distinguishing them from their neighbors. This is “the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit.”

That the Hebrews wrote much of the Bible during the 6th century B.C.E. Babylonian exile suggests another origin of othering. If a people are indigenous to a place, they define themselves by who they are, but if they live on someone else’s land – as Americans do – they define themselves by who they are not. Ironically, the Other threatens our sense of who we are, even though we’ve invented him.

The Other’s characteristics live in our shadows, so he is always lesser. Major categories of otherness are race, class and gender. Boundaries, however, are never permanent. Serious crises or periods of social anxiety can force communities to redefine “us.” Boundaries shift, and so does the image of the Other. Americans in particular have always defined the Other as those (like Dionysus) who *cannot control their impulses*.

Otherness inspires fear of pollution, but it also fascinates us. What disgusts us may reveal what we unconsciously desire. Racists and homophobes are deeply, irrationally dependent upon the objects of their prejudice. Their hatred implies its opposite, an inability to rid the mind of obsessions with the Other. It leads to fictions of innocence and more. Intense and detailed fantasies about the Other reveal a soul – or a nation – attempting to know itself.

Power elites deliberately determine who is Other in order to restrict access to privilege and justify the social order and its prejudices. Eventually, “we” come to believe that the Other deserves low status. Oppression produces segregation – women in the household, poor people in ghettos and prisons, barbarians outside the gates, the insane within the asylums – so “we” can minimize those occasions when the Other might remind us of who we actually are. Segregation merely reinforces the sense of otherness, since there is little opportunity for the close, un-biased contact that might disconfirm our projections.

However, our innate wholeness always threatens to return. Psychologically speaking, what is repressed never dies or goes away; it exists in a timeless realm. The repressed signifies the preserved. Freud wrote of the mental processes of the unconscious: "...time does not change them in any way and the idea of time cannot be applied to them." Even in the realm of physics, Einstein wrote that the distinction between past, present and future is only "a stubborn, persistent illusion." Mythologically speaking, all residents of the underworld await the time when they will return to this world.

Othering takes two primary modes. The first is exclusionary, making the Other as unlike us as possible. The second is incorporative – colonizing and assimilating him, denying his own voice. Together, they create "good" and "bad" opposites like noble savage/barbarian and Madonna/whore.

Othering is inconsistent. Europeans projected opposing images upon Jews: "id" figures who would sexually pollute Christian blood, and stingy, "superego" bankers, unwilling to assimilate. Bigots see black people as both lazy and threatening. Richard Nixon warned of both "the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy..." During the 1991 Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Judge Clarence Thomas, right-wing senators alternatively accused Anita Hill as being either a spurned woman – or a lesbian. Such discourse doesn't care whether the terms of othering are logical or not. Any demonizing narrative will do.

We unconsciously split the Other into inner and outer. The more we define self or community by impermeable boundaries, the more we are obsessed with the Other, both without and within the walls. We fear barbarism without, and decadence within. Having invented "outer Others" to define what they were not, the Hebrews also found evil within: military defeats, claimed the prophets, were due to God's wrath at corruption. Indeed, raising fear of the "outer Other" (now, terrorists) inevitably evokes the "inner Other" (illegal immigrants).

Both the paranoid and the predatory imaginations depend upon othering, as fear of infection or as desire to manipulate. Either we locate Paradise within, to be protected from the Other; or else it is elsewhere, an empty space (like the female body or the American wilderness) ripe for exploitation. By contrast, the polytheistic or creative imagination sees *xenos* as guest. It knows that it needs the Other for completion, understood as a dynamic balance of good and evil, rather than as the victory of good over evil. Its constant flow of imagery produces an overflowing of boundaries as trade, cooperation and ecological interrelatedness.

Sexuality and aggression aren't the only characteristics we project upon others. Those who cannot manifest their own creativity or nobility are likely to perceive those features in public personalities. We personify a grand, transcendent cause – the cosmos itself – as the King. This is the basis of hero worship and the cult of celebrity.

Romantic love, a more benign form of othering, spread through Europe in the same centuries – the late Middle Ages – that religion began to unravel. In the overwhelming experience of erotic love we reach religious states of awe and transcendence. As Ernest Becker wrote, when modern man lost his God he fixed his urge for the divine “onto another person in the form of a love object.”

But in fact this is a great opportunity. Both our longing and our prejudices represent unconscious searching for the Other who is our own deepest nature. Modernity pays grudging attention to this truth with terms like diversity and tolerance. Pagan thinking, however, understands the Other as separate only because of our inability to perceive our oneness with him/her. This realization can potentially crack our innocence and recover our wholeness – but only by passing through the painful realms of grief.

Old languages often gave high priority to hospitality. As I have noted, xenophobia stems from *xenos*: “stranger” or “guest,” while “love of the guest” is *philos-xenia*. Similarly, since indigenous myths are bound up with specific landscapes, tribal people are unconcerned if their neighbors’ myths differ from their own; such myths were obviously meant to make sense of a different experience.

Perhaps there is no more fundamental divide between modern and tribal culture than in this approach to the Other. Consider that Americans use the same word for strangers – aliens – as we do for non-human extra-terrestrials. Many indigenous people called themselves “the people,” seemingly implying that others weren’t “people.” Then why were they often so hospitable (*xenia* is Greek for hospitality)? Where identity is conferred by culture rather than by race or politics, where trade binds people into forms of mutual obligation, they perceive strangers not as non-human, but as lacking social status. They attempt to incorporate them into a recognized status system so they can relate to them. Genuine communities – even if they rarely exist in the world anymore – would perceive the Other not as a threat, but as one who may have something to contribute. Hence the friendly, if naïve, receptions reported by most colonialists.

Whites, however, have commonly described tribal rituals as “grotesque” and “savage.” The essence of the Western, male mind, writes Barbara Ehrenreich, has been its ability to “...resist the contagious rhythm of the drums, to wall itself up in a fortress of ego and rationality against the seductive wildness of the world.”

Denying the Other, we deny ourselves. Othering is at the core of alienation, prejudice and violence. The way out of this trap, however, is not to avoid our suffering through either addiction or spiritual austerities, but to go further into it, toward mythic images such as Dionysus. We risk madness and dismemberment, but there is much to be gained.

-- Only the shallow know themselves. – **Oscar Wilde**

--The soul sees by means of affliction ... the wound and the eye are one and the same. – **James Hillman**

-- When the American opens a...door in his psychology, there is a dangerous open gap, dropping hundreds of feet... he will then be faced with an Indian or Negro shadow. – **Carl Jung**

--The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less. – **Eldridge Cleaver**

--The grief and sense of loss that we often attribute to a failure in our personality is actually an emptiness where a beautiful and strange otherness should have been encountered. -- **Paul Shepard**

-- Call the world the vale of soul-making. – **John Keats**

-- To be born is to be weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile. – **Ben Okri**

--En-lakesh (You are the other me) – **Mayan Indian chant**

What is the knocking? What is the knocking at the door in the night?

It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.

Admit them, admit them. – **D. H. Lawrence**

-- There are no others. – **Ramana Maharshi**