The Toxicity of Otherness

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The Toxicity of Otherness

What is Otherness?
Humans have a natural tendency to categorize information, so they can better process the world around them. This can become dangerous when applied to groups of people. Othering occurs once a group is categorized and socially seen as outsiders, deviations from the norm. This eventually leads to the discrimination and eventual displacement of the group, in an attempt to restore social normality.

Who has been Othered?
Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, an executive order from President Roosevelt was signed, giving military officials the right to forcibly evacuate any person deemed a “residential enemy”. The order specifically avoided the mention of any defining traits of people to be targeted. However, it was used for the exclusive purpose of interning Japanese-American citizens all across the Western coast of America. This is just one notable example of Otherness. Many other groups have fallen victim to Othering, including the Native American population and Midwestern farmers during the Great Depression.

How can we prevent Othering?
The primary way to break the cycle of Othering is to share the stories of those who have been through it. In telling these stories, one can break the gap between different cultural upbringings. Barry Lopez, author of Crossing Open Ground, writes of the differences between a person’s internal and external landscapes. The external landscape consists of the physical objects and entities in an environment, and the objective connections between them. The internal landscape is how a person experiences those connections.

Othering starts when someone fails to see how another culture forms their internal landscape differently from themselves. Well-written stories, like Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks or Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, can break down an experience back into base entities and reconstruct those connections. The author creates an empathetic bond with the reader, allowing one to gain a new perspective on the world around them. Forming this connection with the reader transcends any demographic differences.

Works cited:

The future of Otherness
It is difficult to say where the future of American culture will lead, especially considering its past. However, everything seems to be pointing towards a more positive, more inclusive America. Studies have shown that the youth of today are the best-behaved generation by several metrics.

One probably reason for this is how much children and young adults have free and easy access to information. With the advent of platforms like YouTube and Wikipedia, and technology such as laptops, tablets and smartphones, people can find out all they want about differing cultures in only a few seconds of searching. Humans are becoming more connected in every conceivable way, and this new era of connection is leading us towards an elimination of mass Othering.

The first step in eliminating Otherness is identifying when it begins. Once a group is discussed in a way that states unifying similarities between all of its members, one should recognize the potential for Othering. It can be hard to call out those who speak in homogenizing language towards those they do not understand, but it is necessary to defend those whose voices are being ignored. The hope is that one day, stories from the victims of societal Otherness will no longer need to be told.