
What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss

A Student Guide

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Role models and stereotypes

An introduction to the "Other"

If you did a media-related research paper in high school, chances are that your project was about stereotyping. You may have focused on negative images of a particular group or examined particular "role models" that provided an alternative to stereotypes. These two approaches seem to have very different aims: one laying out the problem, the other depicting the solution. And yet there are similarities deep within these positive and negative stereotypes, and this chapter will examine how these two images are part of the same phenomenon, called "Othering." In some ways, this chapter takes the opposite approach from the rest of the chapters in this book. Instead of taking a single common term ("identification," "realism") and multiplying that into more precise language, this chapter takes two seemingly opposite categories ("positive" and "negative" images) and combines them into a single idea.

Not only are there threads that connect positive and negative images, but there are also connections across portrayals of different groups. Regardless of which group you examine, there are certain common themes in what might be called "images of" criticism (images of women, African Americans, Southerners, Muslims, and so on). Negative depictions of minority groups tend to emphasize the same kinds of character qualities, which gives them a sort of interchangeability. This chapter points out some of these parallel strategies, all of which are part of creating "the Other." As we begin to see patterns in the way multiple groups are portrayed, it becomes less likely that these negative qualities exist in the actual groups. What is more likely is that these strategies have become part of a generalized toolkit for portraying people who are "different."

What do we learn by looking at the connections between positive and negative stereotypes? One reason to explore the notion of the "Other" is to break down the link between a group's images and its real characteristics. You may ask, "If there isn't some truth to these stereotypes, then why do we keep seeing them?" This chapter explores how such

images are propagated. And while I believe that we should work for more, better, richer images of people in media, at the same time I want to recognize just how difficult this is. If "Othering" is indeed part of the basic toolkit inherited by mediamakers, then how do they go outside the toolbox? This chapter also examines some of the pitfalls of well-intentioned mediamakers attempting to create "positive" images. By situating stereotypes within the larger process of "Othering," I hope to open up a discussion on the difficult tradeoffs of making images of underrepresented groups.

"Us" and "them"

Every group is deeply invested in policing its boundaries. From high school cliques to nations, we are concerned with defining who gets to be part of the group and who is on the outside. One of the challenges for a modern nation such as the United States is to decide what it means to be "inclusive" while still maintaining a distinctive identity as "Americans." Every bit of mass communication offers an opportunity for us to renegotiate or re-solidify our boundary as an American society.

In fact, I just did a common but subtle little boundary maneuver in that last paragraph, one of the simplest but most powerful ways of defining a group with words. I used the word "us" as if it were clear who was being addressed: "you" the American. If you are reading this in a British or Argentinian class, you have just been subtly excluded in that paragraph. I did this to provide a little demonstration of the power of the words "us" and "you." I will try to avoid excluding people so blatantly in the rest of the chapter, but I also want to acknowledge how difficult it is for me to avoid some level of Othering in this book. When I chose to write this book in a less formal tone, I necessarily created a mental version of "you" the reader, and undoubtedly this creates a "them." For most chapters of this book, I hope that the more personal address works well. In a chapter about the importance of addressing "you" and "them," this tone creates problems. I'll admit that I can't find a way around these difficulties without totally changing the book, and so I leave it in your hands. The bright student should not only read this chapter for its content but also look for the ways that my words create an Other. Go ahead; be brutal. It will give you good practice in thinking critically about how media express meaning.

The tiny words "we," "us," and "you" have considerable rhetorical power. If you accept my words as being addressed to you, then you consider yourself part of the "us." If you do not, then you are part of "them." Consider the way that newscasters, advertisers, or politicians

use such terms when they address their audiences: "Radical Muslims are out to destroy our way of living"; "If you want to save money on your income tax, listen to this offer"; "This next story will put a smile on your face." You don't even have to believe that the message is true. All you have to do is to accept that the message is aimed at you, and then you have accepted that you are part of the "us," the group being targeted by the message. You are one of the people whose living is threatened by "them" (the radical Muslims); you are a lawabiding taxpayer who nevertheless wants to pay less money to the government. If you reject the message's call (changing the channel because you hate mushy feel-good news stories), then you have not only rejected the call to feel part of the group being addressed but you also have denied yourself the possible pleasure of participating in the text.

Louis Althusser calls this simple but powerful process "*interpellation*." Interpellation is when a person accepts that she/he is being addressed. Althusser's example is a police officer yelling, "Hey, you there!" If you answer the call ("Yes, officer?") or if you flee, you are recognizing that you are the person the officer wants to see. You accept an identity not of your own making but one that the officer offers: You are a "possible suspect." This identity is imbedded in the language; it may not even fit you very well. Nonetheless, if you answer or acknowledge the call, you are at least temporarily and partially accepting the role being addressed. You may even feel a little guilty, wondering, "What did I do to attract the cop's attention?" even if you did nothing wrong. Those who do not respond to the cop's shout do not consider themselves under suspicion.

Louis Althusser (1918–90) expanded on the ideas of Karl Marx, arguing that the influence of economics was more complicated than Marx proposed. Althusser said that the various social institutions (the church, education, government, the family, the media, and so on) did not speak with a unified voice to promote the status quo. Although all of these are interrelated through ideology, no one of them controls the others (Marx thought that economic structures were the base that determined a society's foundation). These institutions are relatively autonomous, and so they can contradict each other in their zeal to promote their agendas. Althusser also argued that instead of discussing the "individual" (a Romantic notion of a whole person who has free will) we should focus on the "subject" (a contradictory position that tries to cobble together an identity from the various identities offered to us by society). See Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" for more.

Althusser's example is a fairly broad one, but our mass-mediated society sends hundreds of much more specific "Hey, yous" to us every day. A 16-year-old may barely register hearing a commercial message that says, "Are you looking to refinance your mortgage?" but I listen because I accept "homeowner" as one of my identities. Such "Hey, yous" do not even have to be in words. A commercial that shows trendy hip young people hanging out together is clearly not trying to sell me (a boring middle-aged guy) anything. I let that message pass me by, not accepting its call. We make our way through the world, acknowledging some calls, rejecting others. Bit by bit, this positions us in society as members of this group but not that one, or at least as wannabe members of a group. I may not be as hip as those young people in the commercial, but maybe I am nostalgic for my younger days, or I aspire to be part of a crowd that know each other so intimately. I can accept the commercial's call on any number of levels: "Hey, you, hip young person, person who likes feeling young, or person who wants to be in the in-crowd." The "Hey, yous" of mass media have to be both narrow and broad: broad enough to attract the attention of a sizable number of people, narrow enough so that people will recognize they are being addressed.

The flip side of this process of interpellation is the way that it also excludes. Mediated images are always particular; they show specific people and specific places. When I was growing up in a rural Southern small town, I recognized the intent of those commercial messages aimed at teens who just want to have fun. I also recognized that the actual commercial images of those fun-loving people looked nothing like me and my friends hanging out on a Saturday night. In some ways, I answered the interpellation of those messages. Of course I wanted to have fun. But in other ways, I saw how the message did not fit me. I recognized that I was a "them" and not an "us."

I do not want to overstate the impact of a commercial message I saw when I was 16; nor is this intended as a plea for you to pity me. We are not helpless pawns of media shaping our desires. But one of the media's most powerful strategies is the simple "Hey, you." Over time, through the power of repetition, interpellation can send messages of who belongs and who does not. The power is not in the messages themselves; we filter out many messages that do not "fit" us, and the media are only one source of material for piecing together our identities. These images become important for our self-identities when we accept their call, when we say, "Yes, me!" to the "Hey, you!"

Whether it is accepted or rejected, a call through the media defines a particular version of "people like us." It also frames a "them," which we

call the "Other." The Other is anyone who is not "people like us." As we shall see, the Other is an extraordinarily useful category in storytelling. If mainstream media tend to create protagonists who are in some way "like us," they also populate the world with Others who either oppose the protagonists or present alternatives to them. In this way a film or television program creates a system of values, with some being nearer to "us" and others being positioned as different. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine some of the more common storytelling strategies that link values with Othered identities.

I will begin by looking at the images of one particular group because these images so clearly demonstrate the broad outlines of Othering. American Indians present an interesting case partly because their images have such a long history in American popular culture, dating back to Revolutionaries dressing up as Indians to throw tea overboard in symbolic protest at the Boston Tea Party. Popular imagery of Native Americans has been around long enough to move through several different phases. In addition, American Indians serve as a useful case study because imagination plays such a large part in our images of Indians. In real life, the American government systematically relocated most Indians from their various tribal homelands to reservations that were physically distant from most population centers. Since mainstream culture so rarely encounters real-life Indians, it is relatively free to configure what little it knows about Indian culture into characters that serve useful roles in narratives. This is Othering at its purest, with little need to be constrained by the reality of actual Native American life.

American Indian popular images can be condensed into a single, useful combination: the "noble savage." The noble savage displays both central tendencies of Othering: that Others are different from us because they are naturally better than us in some crucial aspects, and that they are less completely human than we are. Although one side of this Othering seems complimentary to the group and the other insulting, the two aspects are intimately linked. When we assume that the other is different from us in some key aspect, this can be either frighteningly repulsive or exotically attractive. The image of the "noble savage" captures tendencies of Othering: creating an impossibly decent image or a repulsive repository of what "we" have rejected. In many ways, the "noble savage" image embodies our attitudes about many groups, not just Indians. In exploring these assumptions, we will be laying the foundations for a wide variety of Othering.

At the heart of much Othering is the idea that the Indian is somehow closer to nature. "We" may have lost much of our connection to the land because we live in a modern world whose technology and pace cut

us off from a more "natural" way of living. We want the conveniences of this lifestyle, but we also recognize what we have given up, and "we" are nostalgic for a deeper connection with the land. For most of us, this does not mean selling our modern possessions and living in a log cabin. Rather, this nostalgia for simpler times results in weekend car rides to spectacular parks set aside for the modern citizen to reconnect to nature in small doses. But Indians (according to the image) have not made this break from the land. They are much more attuned to natural rhythms of day/night and the seasons, where we try to control those natural phenomena through technology. Their bodies are hardened through struggles to carve out their existence, where we must subject our bodies to machines at the gym to gain a similar physique. Therefore their relationship to their bodies is different; they "live in their bodies" more, while we surround ourselves with the mental and imaginative pleasures of media and cyberspace.

This connection of body to nature, viewed in a positive light, provides the "noble" half of the "noble savage" equation. This can be seen in the figure of the shaman, who uses a mystic connection to nature to open up older, richer forms of consciousness. Perhaps with the aid of natural hallucinogenics such as peyote we can also bypass our modern programming and find a New Age peace by following a spirit animal who will guide us on the shaman's path. Or such a connection to the homeland creates a stronger value on family than "we" have, encouraging Indians to value their elders' wisdom instead of hiding them in institutions designed only for the aged. And thus the "wise old Indian" figure speaks truths that we cannot see because our modern eyes have been blinded through overexposure. Such Indians understand the value of community that we have lost as we immerse ourselves in television and computer screens, isolating ourselves from each other. The tribe/community is the source of meaning for this Indian. Because the tribe is more important than the individual, such Indians are nobly willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the community. Revisionist Westerns portray these noble Indians as peacefully existing on the land until they were forced to defend themselves from Westerners wielding superior technology. The imperial "we" overthrew the noble Indian in our desire to occupy their land, and we hope to reclaim a portion of the conquered perspective by paying visits to air-conditioned cinemas to see stories of simpler people.

This connection to nature can just as easily result in a horrifyingly hostile figure, the "savage" part of the "noble savage." Nature may be beautiful and picturesque, but it is also powerful and destructive, and so anyone connected so closely to nature is also drawn to violence.

Civilization, with all its tendencies toward alienation and weakness, has the distinct advantage of curbing our animal desires. A more "natural" life puts people more in touch with the beast within, making them a danger to society. This image of the Indian gives us the classic Indian enemy, who tracks their prey by seeing signs in nature that we cannot see and who shrieks inarticulate, animalistic war cries before savagely slaughtering "people like us." This Indian indiscriminately kills men, women, and children, taking a scalp as we would take a beaver pelt, further showing his lack of value for human life. This Indian brings not only the threat of death but also the threat of an unbridled sexuality, as the warrior rapes the captive.

Usually we picture this Indian savage in the mythic past, and in general it is easier for us to picture Indians in the past than existing in our modern world. We acknowledge that real Indians still inhabit the twenty-first century, though our imagery of them still gravitates toward premodern times and values. When we do think of more modern Indians, we think of drunken Indians releasing their primitive urges because they cannot hold their liquor as a civilized person should, or of Indians running casinos. The Indian casino further ties the modern Indian to "irrationality," although here they are able to exploit the exploiter's greed for money by running irrational games of chance. This Indian is lazy, which is the flip side of being linked to natural rhythms. Rather than making rational plans to gain money honestly through work (as we teach our children to do), this Indian passively expects to be taken care of by the government like a child. This understanding of the Indian as child encourages us to take a parental role, making decisions in their best interest about where and how they should live.

Table 6.1 will help summarize some of the different values associated with "us" and with the Indian "Other." Of course no single image of the Indian embodies all these qualities, but, as we have discussed, these values are all related through the process of Othering. I have described the case of images of Native Americans in some detail in order to point out how these patterns form the basis for depicting many other groups. Consider the connection between portrayals of African Americans and Native Americans. We see images of young warriors who have been placed into segregated areas (the "hood"), where they travel in tribes ("gangs"), engaging in brutal violence in defense of their land ("turf"). They are irrationally attracted to shiny garish objects ("bling"), just as Indians foolishly mistook beads and trinkets for real value, just as children play dress up to look more like adults. They also are depicted as lazy, preferring to receive government assistance than to eke out an

Table 6.1 Comparing "Other" values with "our" values

The Other/"them"	"Us"
Nature	Modernity
Savagery	Civilization
Body	Mind
Irrationality	Rationality
Sexuality	Repression
Laziness	Industry
Childhood	Adulthood
Tradition	Progress
Community/group	Individual
Past	Present/future
Connection	Alienation
Place	Mobility
Relaxed time/rhythm	Regulated time/rhythm
Timeless wisdom	Specific knowledge
Simplicity	Complexity

honest living. Black urban culture is depicted as a "hang out" culture, often full of brazen display ("booty shaking") that reveals their sexual confidence. If the young black person lives through this harrowing world, then he/she has a chance to become wise. The "wise older Indian" (played by Graham Greene in *Dances with Wolves*) and the "wise older black man/woman" (played by Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption* or Cicely Tyson in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*) serves essentially the same purpose in storytelling.

Or consider similar patterns in the understanding of "women." Advertising emphasizes "softer" selling as the way to target women, with ads focused less on rational information and more on emotional appeals. The standard formula for making a Hollywood action film more attractive to women is to give the male hero a love interest, since women are assumed to be more interested in intimate connectedness. This emphasis on interconnection makes women different in business and public affairs, according to such imagery. A world run by women would be kinder and gentler, more attuned to the needs of family, and thus "nobler." It would be less driven, more focused on taking time to talk with others in the community. Women have this different perspective because of the distinct experience of their bodies, according to this way of thinking. They give birth and therefore are more connected to childhood; they are tied to monthly cycles that make them irrational; they are obsessed with how their bodies look.

We can see similar patterns in the Western depiction of Asian peoples as being intimately more tied to community and family than "we" are, even to the point of squelching individuality for the good of the whole. Such individuals are capable of unthinkable sacrifice (kamikazes, hari-kari) to preserve the community. When we look at modern Japanese business strategies, we see them as operating with a distinctive communal culture. More typically, we Westerners picture Asian culture as a culture of the past, emphasizing stories of long-ago China and Japan over modern times. Everyone in a martial arts film seems to be born with a body that can engage in spectacular kung fu, just as everyone in black culture seems to have an innate ability to dance.

I do not believe that all stereotypes are exactly the same. There is a particular inflection in each group's stereotype (such as an Asian's martial arts abilities and Italian Americans as mobsters). But much of that stereotype retraces the outline of the Other (the Mafioso's value on family and violence, for instance). The particularity of a stereotype is the remnant that is left over after you remove the generic Othering strategies (for more on generic Othering, see the Na'vi in *Avatar*, which mixes and matches various bits of native imagery).

You can go on with this exercise (and I encourage you to do so), finding ways that various real-life "Othered" groups reconfigure the set of values (positively and negatively) that are on the chart. At some point in this discussion, some of you may speak from your own experiences to say, "Wait a minute! The stereotypes are partly true! Black culture is about dancing! Women really do like talking about emotions more! Chinese people do believe in family!" and so on. What I would say to you is that Othering makes it difficult to see the truth of any of these statements. Since Othering tends to portray groups as noble and/or savage, this makes it hard for us to see any actual nobility or savagery in the group. It is hard to separate the actual behavior of real people from the images that circulate concerning their group. How do you know if you are seeing a real group characteristic or simply an example that is more vivid because it confirms what you have been taught about that group through Othering?

Media Othering is not so powerful that it overrides your real-life experience. If you have spent considerable time in Native American culture, your images of actual Indians will outweigh a more generalized notion of the "noble savage." But Othering does shape your experiences and your interpretation of them. Othered images have a kind of magnetism. If we see a real-life instance that confirms our image of the Other, we tend to give that example special attention. The Other draws confirming real examples to it like a magnet attracts iron. Isolated

instances that do not fit the Othered image are not clustered together (just as a magnet does not attract glass), and so they tend to accumulate less weight. Over time you can gather examples of group members that violate the Othered image, and you can reject the attractive power of the Other. But the image of the Other does exert a force in our perception, not only over groups that we know little about but also over populations that we encounter. By seeing how generic Othering can be, you can guard against an unthinking understanding that women are more tied to community or African Americans tend to be more sexual. Seeing the Other as a broad social pattern (and not a collection of isolated stereotypes) helps us begin to see our own world more clearly.

Creating the evil other, creating the funny other

When discussing the ways that popular images create Others, it is all too easy to blame Big Bad Hollywood (BBH). BBH is perpetuating stereotypes and doing damage to the social fabric of the world's societies. If we could just get those greedy, insensitive producers in BBH to think more carefully about the images they distribute, then maybe we could have more positive images.

However, almost every mediamaker I have met does not fit this stereotype of BBH. It is, of course, hard to generalize about an entire profession, but the mediamakers I have met tend to be thoughtful and well-meaning, which complicates the idea that changing the personnel will also change the institution. Othering is part of the language of storytelling that Hollywood uses every day (see Chapter 3). Regardless of who is behind the camera or writing the script, mediamakers confront similar narrative problems, and Othering can provide a useful solution in many storytelling situations.

Let's take a simple scene in which you (the mediamaker) want your hero to walk down a menacing urban street. There are many different ways to convey this sense of a frightening environment. You could use sound effects to startle your protagonist or lighting to create sharp, deep shadows. You can also put intimidating figures on the street. Making media always involves a command of the details, and so you would have to cast particular actors to lurk in those shadows. You would need figures that would instantly convey criminal intent through their body types, posture, hairstyles, and clothing. Of course, anyone can potentially be a violent criminal in real life, given the right mixture of genetic disposition and social environment. However, in this storytelling instance, you don't have time to show how a group of

clean-cut suburban white kids became a gang of menacing toughs. These are not major characters with complicated backstories in your film. These are extras who are onscreen briefly, and so you probably would rely on storytelling shorthand. You tend to choose African American or Hispanic over white extras; young rather than old; male over female. If you do choose a racial mixture of tough characters, you probably would rely on other counterbalancing factors from the language of imagery. Your lone white boy would probably be roughly shaven and darker; your white girl might be leather clad and pierced, not dressed in pastels. You are not being intentionally racist or sexist. You are simply a mediamaker trying to do a straightforward job: make it seem briefly dangerous for your hero to walk to a parked car. This is your hero's story, not the urban youths'. In telling that story, you have fallen prey to the magnetism of the Other. You have unwittingly reinforced its long history.

We learn this history rather quickly through frequent exposure to storytelling situations such as the one above. I learned just how quickly we absorb the language of Othering when my four-year-old son and I played with Lego blocks together. We were playing a "good guy/bad guy" scenario, and my son confidently chose which of the two Lego figures was the bad guy. Since I am an academic who deals with representation, I asked him why that particular Lego character was the evil one. He said, "Because it's darker." In spite of my best left-leaning intentions to raise a child without prejudice, my son had learned his lesson from four years of watching children's media. The villain in cartoons is the character with darker skin, facial hair, and a deeper voice. If only it were this easy to spot the "bad guy" in real life! But the media do not present the real world; they show one narrative situation after another, each one relying on the language of imagery, each one based on the multiple mini-calculations of specific representation for specific storytelling purposes.

The mediamakers' job is to maximize the story's impact on the audience, and so the temptation is to use everything in their power to make the villain as reprehensible as possible. One way to examine the history of Othering is to look at the villains in film. The most effective antagonist, all other things being equal, is one that activates a society's deep fears. Two figures representing chaos served this purpose in the Western: the savage American Indian and the outlaw who did not obey the "code of the West." Spy films, war narratives, detective stories, and action movies often need dependably recognizable villains for their narratives to work, and such figures can be powerful embodiments of Othered values. As our society becomes more attuned to identity politics,

it becomes more difficult to find a "hissable" villain figure who does not represent a valued important minority, and so the Nazi, the terrorist, and the redneck can serve the dependable purposes that Indians and the Viet Cong once did.

In many modern media the hero bears a strong resemblance to the antagonist because he/she needs some similar qualities (a loose interpretation of the law, perhaps) in order to defeat the foe. In such cases, you should pay attention to how the film draws the line between "us" and "them" because such media provide particularly good laboratories to experiment with the nuances of villainous Othering. Of course fictional media do not present reality; they give us a closed storytelling system with limited options for our sympathies. The hero may be reprehensible in absolute moral terms, but at least he/she is morally preferable to our other options in the film/television program. One of the best ways to make a morally shady hero acceptable to us is to surround him/her with characters who are more shady, more Othered. Although Kareem Said and Tobias Beecher in the prison series *Oz* are sometimes capable of violence and cruelty, they are not as sadistic as most of the other convicts in Oswald State Penitentiary. Having more violent alternatives makes Said and Beecher seem more "like us." Such media encourage us to make moral calibrations: which of these characters' qualities is worse? These villains and heroes negotiate between those qualities that are valued and those that are Othered. (See Chapter 3 for more discussion on morally preferable characters.)

Horror media, particularly those dealing with the supernatural, provide useful case studies in villainous Othering because filmmakers have fewer worries about their representations upsetting any group of actual humans (since there are no powerful pro-vampire or -zombie rights organizations). Certainly the undead are horrifying, but if filmmakers can combine these frightening figures with our real-world anxieties, they can create even more effective monsters. Robin Wood has argued that one can trace the history of modern American anxieties by looking at the progression of monsters in Hollywood horror films. When horror films emerged in the 1930s, the villains represented a vague sense of "European-ness" (without insulting any actual European immigrant communities—where the heck *was* Transylvania, anyway?) threatening the straight white (and rather boring) romantic couple. After World War II the focus changed to more internal concerns. Wood argues that the family becomes the source of our anxieties. We are afraid that we are losing our innocent children (*Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*) to forces outside our control, creating misshapen

families (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). Horror media can activate our fears of the mentally unstable, encroaching technology, border invasions by real-life (illegal) aliens, and so on. Add some zombie makeup and these social fears can be made into well-disguised but potent monsters.

The Other can be frightening; it can also be funny. In its aggressive form, the Other appears to have vicious claws, but if you de-claw the Other, his/her difference can serve as the butt of our jokes. In the classic setup of a comedy duo, the "straight" man is the one who is more like "us," and the "funny" one more easily fooled than we are. Comedies often depend on a violation of our role expectations, and so they can reinforce those expectations by showing us their opposite. For example, remember our imaginary scene involving a gang of toughs. Now cast the scene with little old ladies, and you have a comedy. In fact, this is exactly what Monty Python did in the classic sketch "Hell's Grannies." The whole joke of the sketch is the comic spectacle of a gang of grandmothers on a delinquent rampage. This provides a twist on the "straight" way to stage such a scene, reminding us of our stereotypes about age and gender.

Sitcom casts are configured to provide multiple opportunities for laughs, but often the biggest outsider is the one who gets the biggest laughs. Everyone on *Friends*, *Cheers*, and *Seinfeld* delivers punchlines, but these sitcoms also create systems where some characters are more "normal" than others. Ross and Rachel are usually savvier than the clueless Joey and Phoebe; Sam is more grounded than the lovable losers who populate his bar; and Jerry (in spite of his many foibles) is still astonished at Kramer's bizarre antics. Many points of difference can be positioned as the funny Other in a sitcom, from political conservatism (*Family Ties*) to nerdism (*Family Matters*). The same quality can be "like us" in one comedy and Othered in another sitcom, depending on the particular arrangement of elements. In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy's desire to function outside the home makes her the Other; and her Hispanic husband Ricky has the more "reasonable" attitude concerning the woman's place in society. One could easily imagine another sitcom that makes the heavily accented Ricky (or Apu from *The Simpsons* or Khan from *King of the Hill*) the comic focus.

This comic Othering cuts both ways. On one hand, the biggest Other is the biggest butt of jokes, and thus participates in a long line of denigrating humor (one of the clearest ways to see how Othering works across groups is the interchangeability of many ethnic jokes. You can usually substitute "Polack" or "Texas Aggie" or "Manchester United Red Army" into "blonde" jokes—and vice versa—without damaging

their humor).¹ On the other hand, the comic Other is often the breakout star. Zany Lucy is the star of *I Love Lucy*, not her husband Desi Arnaz. Urkel the nerd is the memorable figure from *Family Matters*. It's fun to play the comic Other; by definition, they get to do the most outrageous things. Without these figures' blundering, there would be no plot to these sitcoms, and so the Other can be the most narratively important character in the series.

This comedy strategy has a long, checkered history dating back at least to the minstrel days of blackface in America. One of the reasons white performers darkened their faces was that it allowed them to act more freely than white people could in proper society. Blackface allowed them to make verbal mistakes, to be more sexual, and to behave like animals. It can be hard to break free from this history of Othering, even when creating a feel-good narrative about accepting Others. For instance, *Shrek* appears to be a world full of Others, from ogres to outrageously accented cats. But some Others are more Other than others. Ogres Shrek and Fiona are the "people like us," with Donkey serving as the more outlandish comic figure (with African American comedian Eddie Murphy providing a blackface vocal performance). Comic Othering, therefore, is tricky. Becoming an Other can distinguish you from the crowd; it can make you a star. However, the price of that stardom is that you become the "problem" that must be solved in each episode. Lucy must be put back into the home; Homer Simpson's reckless actions endanger his family, and Marge must restore things to normal. The logic of much comic storytelling depends on someone sticking their neck out far enough to be different enough for "us" to laugh at them.

"You're taking these jokesters far too seriously," you may be saying. "They're comedians, not politicians. What difference does Homer Simpson really make?" One of the main points of this chapter is that a television program or film does not exist in isolation from the rest of media history. Part of the "joke" of Homer Simpson is that the dumbest

¹ "Aggies" are the mascot of Texas A&M University, which has a spirited American football rivalry with the University of Texas Longhorns. The Manchester United Red Army is one of the most notorious groups of soccer "hooligans," whose spirited support of the British football club contributed to physical brawls and riots, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. "Polack jokes" (which portrayed Polish immigrants as unintelligent) circulated widely in the United States in the twentieth century, perhaps most famously in TV's *All in the Family*. The "dumb blonde" stereotype has a long history featuring Marilyn Monroe, Judy Holliday, Suzanne Sommers, and Lisa Kudrow.

member of the family is the father, the one who allegedly should "know best." Mark Crispin Miller has argued that we can trace a shift in the depiction of sitcom families from earlier days in which the child was the source of the humorous problem and the father brought the wise solution to the problem ("Ward, I'm worried about the Beaver"). In the 1980s, Bill Cosby was the "funny man" of the family as well as the source of family wisdom. With *The Simpsons* we see a full inversion of status: the father is a buffoon and the children are savvier and hipper. The reasons behind this shift are complex, involving a marketing focus on youth culture, changing attitudes toward parental authority, and so on. But Homer Simpson's humor depends on this changing history of the father's image in American pop culture. The shift from the father as having attitudes "like us" to the father as "Other" is significant.

The other crucial point to make here is that whenever you put a figure into a story, the relationships become complex. I have briefly cited Lucy Ricardo and Homer Simpson as relatively straightforward Others, but when you actually look at the narratives, these characters become more complicated. Yes, Lucy is the comic spectacle that her husband Ricky must tame, but there are times when Ricky is Othered for his funny accent and Lucy is more "like us." Similarly, Homer is the butt of many jokes, but there are times when the narrative positions him as more "like us," compared to Apu's foreignness.

Even while depicting these characters as "Others," these programs also gain sympathy for them by encouraging our identification, linking us powerfully with them (see Chapter 3). Narrative is complicated in the way it engages our social attitudes and our personal emotions. Rarely is a figure nothing but a "father" or an "Indian" in a narrative because the story gives them a particular history, and we can engage with various parts of the character. We can find simpler examples of Othering in briefer media forms, such as print advertisements and television commercials. In such short ads, we may see figures that purely stand in for "father" (as a man romps with his baby in a diaper commercial) or "Indian" (in an environmental public service announcement). These "characters" are meant to evoke their social type quickly, since the advertisement does not have time to give them particular backstories (we don't know how the father was treated by his father, or if the Indian sued to regain tribal land). Even the images in brief ads or in music videos can be complicated, particularly if they present stories. But the nonnarrative three-minute music video is probably the longest media form that can situate people mostly as "type." With anything longer than this, Othering becomes more complex because of the way that storytelling complicates character and elicits emotion.

The burden of the "positive" image

"Ok, even if you can't step outside the long history of negative images, you can certainly create positive images today, right?" Part of the difficulty in this question is the very idea of "positive" and "negative" images. Much popular debate about media forces this binary choice: is a character/celebrity a "role model" or a "negative/false image?" Such simple choices may make good fodder for pop articles, but they do a disservice to the complexity of storytelling. In this section we will discuss the hopelessly high standard of creating a "positive" image that is not simultaneously "negative" in some ways. We will discuss how the very idea of a "positive" image places an impossible burden on representations of the Other.

What would it mean for a character to be a "positive role model" for an Othered group? What would it look like if a single character was the positive embodiment of, say, "the black experience?" For this to occur, we must first believe that there is such a single thing as the black experience. What is the center of the African American experience in America? The obvious answer would be skin color, but "blackness" incorporates a large range of skin tones, and people with similar skin tones can think of themselves as either "African American" or "multi-racial." One might say that discrimination is the centerpiece of black experience, but overt discrimination is a less prominent feature of a growing number of middle-class African Americans. Perhaps "black culture" (the church or African American music forms) is the factor that ties together the diverse people who consider themselves to be African American, but black cultural forms are also the backbone of mainstream culture. It is impossible to imagine American popular music without black idioms. How "black" is rap when the primary purchasers of rap albums are young white men? As Stuart Hall once asked, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?"

Stuart Hall (born 1932) is one of the leading figures of British cultural studies, a school of thought that developed at the University of Birmingham, a city with (then) a vibrant industrial working class. Cultural studies says that any cultural phenomenon must be studied from multiple perspectives in order to understand it fully. The traditional university is structured into departments that encourage specialization, but cultural studies encourages scholars to work across these disciplines so that research will not be too narrow. Hall is known for emphasizing the active negotiation over meaning in culture. Instead of audiences passively swallowing the meanings encoded by an author, real audiences/readers take a variety of positions. Real

audiences/readers can give the reading preferred by the author, or an interpretation opposite to the author's, or a variety of negotiated stances in between. Hall continues to write on culture, race, and identity. See *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

One of the fantasies of Othering is that there is a center to the Othered group. This can be a politically useful strategy; it can be advantageous for a group of people who call themselves "black" to act together as a political or economic unit. In such circumstances, it is useful for them to proceed as if there was a clear "essence" to blackness. But it is difficult to say exactly what the central experience is that links them all. The trouble with saying that there is a "center" to a cultural experience is that this also excludes other people as being "less central." There is a tendency to select a central "poster image" that embodies the Other. For lesbians, the white professional lesbian is the image that non-lesbians tend to picture when they think about the group. For contemporary black culture, the urban young man with ghetto "credibility" is the center. And so the urban "gangster" is "blacker" than a middle-class African American. His figure circulates more widely in black culture than, say, the rural black experience. A central image can help unite a community, but it also can divide that community with the now familiar game of "us" and "them."

It is impossible to find a single image that truly embodies a cultural experience, and so any high profile image of an Other is doomed to be inadequate. A character is necessarily a specific configuration of qualities. There is no way that this single character can depict the breadth of experience of people who call themselves "African American." For example, let us consider the most visible black man on television in the 1980s: Bill Cosby. In some ways, he played a seemingly perfect "role model" on *The Cosby Show*. He was an eminently successful doctor in an affectionate, mature marriage who presided over a loving family. His children presented problems, but he ably resolved them within each episode, fulfilling his role as classic sitcom father. In achieving this success, Cosby did not hide his black heritage on the show. He displayed Afrocentric art on the walls of his home, and he foregrounded black jazz musicians, who made appearances on the show. In almost every way imaginable, Bill Cosby, as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, portrayed a figure that black and white audiences could embrace. The problem with such a highly visible black "role model" was perhaps that it was so perfect that it was unrealistic. Although certainly there were successful black doctors in happy families in America, the portrait of the Huxtables

was so far removed from the experience of many black Americans that it served as an unreachable fantasy.

Here we see the trap of the "positive image" of the Other. We want such images to depict qualities to which the group aspires. At the same time, we want them to be representative of the group's current state. How can any one image accomplish both goals? To err in one direction is to be "unrealistic" (see Chapter 2); going too far in the other direction can result in images that seem to continue negative stereotypes. We put impossible, contradictory pressures on images of the Other to stand in for all members of a group. We expect the black "role model" to embody the essence of the African American experience, if there is such a thing. To exalt any one figure as an example of the black experience is to make other black people's experience seem more marginal. The obligation to present a "positive image" is a heavy burden, forcing the weight of an entire group onto one character.

The tradeoffs in making "positive images"

Instead of trying to classify characters into two impossibly broad groups ("role models" and "negative stereotypes"), perhaps it would be better to discuss positive and negative aspects of such characters. Every character is a particular configuration of qualities, and often progressive characteristics are combined with more stereotypical qualities. But perhaps it is not enough to sort characteristics into "positive" and "negative," because any one aspect may have positive and negative consequences at any given moment in history. Rarely can progress occur without cost. Even a strategy that seems to represent a clear move forward is often tied to a tradeoff. Let's look at the tradeoffs of trying to advance the images of an underrepresented group.

In this section, I will survey some of the strategies that such media-makers have used to depict African Americans. I have chosen African Americans because the large effort to improve such images over the last several decades allows us to see several different progressive strategies. Just as there are patterns in how media portray Others negatively, there are also patterns in how media try to make those images better. I will discuss these strategies in a rough chronological order, though I do not believe that progressive Othered images necessarily need to follow a particular order. By focusing on black images, we can see some of the tradeoffs involved in trying to improve representations of Others.

One strategy used particularly in early progressive images of Others is to make the Other the problem. This is the "big issue" strategy, placing the Other's difference at the heart of the narrative. When African

American Lucas Beauchamp is accused of murdering a white man in *Intruder in the Dust*, the entire story develops around the central question of whether the town's most prominent white lawyer will represent him, keep him from being lynched, and prove him innocent in court in spite of the odds. Beauchamp's race is the issue to be dealt with, not the question of his guilt or innocence, and a courtroom drama allows plenty of opportunity for making speeches about that issue. (We can see similar strategies in *Philadelphia*, where Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) is fired from his law firm only because he has AIDS, leading to a legal showdown.) The difficulty here is that the character at the center of these stories becomes synonymous with their issue/problem. Beauchamp is defined by his blackness to a large extent, and Beckett is his disease, as far as the narrative is concerned. Real people are more complicated, and so you cannot reduce them solely to their race or their illness. In addition, *Intruder in the Dust* provides an example of other progressive Othering strategies. Here we see the white savior who intervenes and saves the day, a strategy that keeps the focus on the issue but also seems to say that the Other is helpless to improve their own situation. (In *Philadelphia*, Beckett must convince a homophobic lawyer to represent him.) *Mississippi Burning* has a similar dynamic, with two white outsiders entering a tightly knit community to investigate a racially charged disappearance in the 1960s.

These two films, *Intruder in the Dust* and *Mississippi Burning*, also demonstrate another standard progressive Othering strategy: setting the story in the past. A civil rights story that occurs in the 1960s can provide an emotionally satisfying narrative where the forces of right defeat obvious villains (clearly racist Southern white men). Setting the story in "simpler times" does a disservice to the past (which is never simple), but it allows the narrative to be straightforward. It becomes easy for us to situate the problem long ago ("Racism was a big deal back then, but not any more"). Because such media depict racism using the familiar form of melodrama (with larger-than-life villains), they allow us to feel sanctimonious ("I am certainly not like that racist"). Situating the problem in the past (even when glorifying the historical struggles of real heroes) also allows us to be comfortably distant from any present version of the problem.

When the issue is the central focus of the film or television program, there is a temptation to "stack the deck," to make the Other so impeccably good that he/she cannot possibly be disliked. I call this the "Sydney Poitier" strategy. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a young white woman brings home her black fiancé (John Wade Prentice, played by Poitier) to meet her old-fashioned parents. The shocked mother and father oppose the idea of the interracial union, but they are won over by

Prentice. How could they not be? Poitier's Prentice is "one of the good ones." He is an internationally respected doctor who is also a philanthropist. His manners are perfect; he is sexually chaste and financially responsible. The only thing you could possibly dislike about Poitier's character is that he is just too perfect. Again, the melodramatic formula tells us exactly how we should feel about this squeaky clean hero. The rationale behind this strategy is clear: make the Other so likable that the only possible reason to reject them is their difference. The tradeoff? By making our sympathies crystal clear, this implies that the Other needs to be flawless in order to be accepted. If the standard for acceptance is an Ivy League education, affluence, flawless social graces, and good looks, then how many real people can possibly achieve this? In trying to send a message of tolerance, such films can come across as setting the bar for acceptance impossibly high.

Another strategy (perhaps as a response to imagery of the Other who needs to be saved) depicts the Other as a power fantasy. During the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s, relatively inexpensive films such as *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Coffy* showed black characters who literally kicked butt. These characters strode boldly and coolly through their worlds, certainly providing a figure of wish fulfillment for many black (and white) audiences. These figures were almost superheroic in their invulnerability as they quashed those who opposed them. Blaxploitation presented the anti-establishment version of this power fantasy, while the black doctors we have discussed (Poitier's Prentice and Cosby's Huxtable) present a version of the powerful African American who works within the system. The difficulty with these characters is that they appear fully formed and powerful; we have little sense of how they came to be this way. These characters appear to have taken an amazing leap to the head of the class in spite of improbable odds. Would the establishment allow a figure such as Shaft or Coffy in real life? How did Prentice and Huxtable gain their respected status? Such power fantasy figures can appear almost magical, as if they were somehow able to bypass effortlessly the structures that keep people from power. While identifying with such characters may give the pleasure of wish fulfillment, at the same time they can emphasize that this status is merely a wish, that it is unlikely for any one person to rise to these heights. Or such media can give the impression that our society has improved so much that nothing now holds an individual back from getting their wishes. It is easy to confuse images of power with real-life changes in the power structure.

Eventually, the figure of the "positive" Other can appear in a film without being the central focus of the narrative. In some ways this

appears to be "progress," since the Other can appear as a "regular person" without being so disruptive to the story that they necessarily have to be the "problem." This strategy often results in the Other as token. Adding an African American to a group satisfies the overt need for "diversity"; adding more than one threatens to make the film/TV program appear to be targeted specifically at black audiences, not the "mainstream." The token strategy usually places the Other in a supporting role, not wanting to make the Other the protagonist and risk having audiences mislabel the text as a "black film" or a "black show." Others make great "best friends" to the white protagonists. In this role, they provide a listening ear when the protagonist has troubles to discuss, and often (in a variation on the Wise Old Black Person) they dispense savvy, sassy advice (Wanda Sykes has made a career out of such roles). This role integrates the Other into the mainstream community but keeps them out of the action that drives the narrative.

In this strategy, usually no one mentions the fact that the Other is actually Other, and this itself is an important strategy, called "exnomination" (literally, "not naming"). Exnomination is one of the most powerful ways to signal that someone is "like us." For example, look at the difference between these two sentences: "I have a friend who lives in that building" and "I have a black friend who lives in that building." The friend's race is not relevant to the discussion, and so the word "black" in the second sentence is extraneous information, or rather the race is not named in the first sentence. A white person saying this first sentence is probably doing exnomination; by not specifying the race, the assumption is that the friend is also white. By naming the race in the second sentence, the speaker is positioning the friend as "Other," as a member of a category that needs to be named. Richard Dyer has argued that part of the power of whiteness is that whiteness appears to be nothing at all. White people often do not think of themselves as white; they often think of themselves as having no race or heritage in particular. Exnominating their own race can free a person to "try on" another ethnic style, since their own race does not pose a barrier. This may enable a white person to dabble more easily in salsa dancing or Buddhism as a way to feel either more "passionate" or more "serene." For an African American to engage in Buddhist meditation may seem more a rejection of his/her cultural heritage. Exnomination can be freeing to the members of a group, but it can also subtly transform any group that must be named into an Other.

I recall a particularly consistent strategy of exnomination on the television show *L.A. Law* in the 1980s. When the show used a black actor as a trial judge for the first time, no one on the show commented

on the actor's race. Having a black judge had no bearing on the trial (the case did not involve race), and so there was no story motivation that required the judge to be black. Though none of the other characters seemed to notice the character's race, I certainly did. "Wow! A black judge on TV! Cool!" I thought. The next time I saw a black judge on the show, I thought, "Wow, this show has some nicely progressive politics. They're putting African Americans on the bench." (Another way to read this strategy would be to ground it in realism, since there was a real-world push to increase African American presence in the judicial system.) Thereafter when I saw an African American presiding over an *L.A. Law* trial, I said, "Black judge" to myself. I named them. Eventually over time I stopped and simply labeled them "judges." At that point I no longer saw them as Other. Through a combination of exnomination and repetition, the makers of *L.A. Law* had made "progress," at least with me.

But as this chapter has made clear, progressive strategies of representation are difficult, and they change over time. When the same writer of *L.A. Law* (David E. Kelley) later did another legal show called *Ally McBeal*, the show also used exnomination in its portrayal of race and romance. When white Ally McBeal dated an African American man, there was never any mention of either of their races. Under these circumstances, the strategy that seemed progressive a few years earlier seemed like avoidance. How realistic is it that a white woman and a black man can have a long-term relationship without race having any bearing whatsoever? *Ally McBeal*, like most narrative texts, is complicated, but the point I want to emphasize here is that exnomination, like all of the progressive strategies I have examined here, has its tradeoffs, and that the meaning of any single strategy changes as the history of representation changes.

So what?

At the close of this chapter, you may be asking yourself, "Why should I care about images of the Other?" If you are a member of a minority group, you may say that you personally don't feel bound by the images that circulate of your group. Even if you do not think that images influence the real lives of group members, you should recognize the way that popular images create a forum for us to talk about the real lives of Othered people. When Murphy Brown had a baby outside of marriage, when Mel Gibson made anti-Semitic remarks, when we learned that Ronald Reagan's or Dick Cheney's daughter was gay: these images opened up moments where we could discuss what it means to be an

unwed mother or Jewish or gay. If you do not think that the images are important in and of themselves, then you should at least recognize that we as a society behave as if they are important. We talk about and legislate images (such as those in video games) as if we were dealing with the real-world phenomena that these images represent. These fictional or celebrity images provide an opportunity for us to talk about the lives of real, ordinary, everyday people, and that discussion (like the one you have in your classroom) can have an impact that extends into people's lives.

If you are not a member of an Othered group, why should you care about this process, except for a general caring for other people's lives? Throughout history, groups have defined themselves by who they are not, and fundamental ideas take shape as we draw these boundaries. For instance, Orlando Patterson has argued that the way we know what "freedom" is depends on the practice of slavery. Whatever "freedom" means (and it means different things to different people), we know that it is not slavery, and so the opposite, the Other, defines the concept. Philip DeLoria has traced how we have defined the notion of "American" in reaction to our changing popular image of the Indian. DeLoria emphasizes that these images of the Other are not distant, separate concepts; in fact, one vital way we learn who "we" are is by playing the role of the Other. Throughout history, mainstream Americans have "played Indian": masquerading at the Boston Tea Party, reading *The Last of the Mohicans*, doing Indian crafts at camp, and going on New Age "vision quests." By doing these activities, by taking on Indian styles temporarily, by allying ourselves with Indian characters, "we" get a taste of what we think it would be like to be "them" before we go back to being "us." We can temporarily feel what it would be like to be a "gangsta" by rapping along with a hit single; we can inject more "passion" into our lives by learning to salsa or we can try on a bit of class by doing ballroom dancing; we can sample the exotic Orient for the price of a meal or a ticket to *Memoirs of a Geisha*. DeLoria points out that we live these images of the Other (at least temporarily on the weekends or in movie theaters), that we define who "we" are by sampling who we are not, and so the politics of Othering is not an issue solely for minorities.

Notice that the activities I just listed are not only things we do but also usually involve buying products. Although at one time these lived experiences may have required actual physical interaction with the Other, for most of us in the modern/postmodern world, these are commercial transactions. We pay for dance lessons, restaurant meals, song downloads, and movie tickets. Although these may feel like

samples of another perspective, we should also remember that these perspectives have been commercialized, which necessarily changes them. A commercialized version of the Other is necessarily different from an "authentic" experience (if there is such a thing). It re-envisioned the Other in a way that is more palatable to the intended audience, whether that audience is broadly defined (in a blockbuster film) or a targeted niche (the New Age audience). And so Cherokee Indians don full headdresses to take pictures with tourists (although the feathered headdress is a Plains Indian tradition), and Chinese restaurants in Western countries cater to our expectations of what "Chinese food" is, often serving different menu items than the food consumed in China.

Popular culture has its own mechanisms that interact with but are separable from the rest of the "real world." Once it finds a popular image, popular culture tends to recycle variations on a theme until economics forces a change. Pop images can circulate for a long time with little connection to anything "real" other than other images. For instance, the fantasy of the Southern plantation continues to recycle imagery defined by romanticized stories written around the Civil War era, even though these images had little to do with the majority of Southern farms. As long as there is a market for the images, Hollywood will be tempted to perpetuate them, regardless of whether they portray a "realistic" vision of a group. Othering is something that groups throughout history do; this practice is given a particularly commercial spin in our time, which alters that process.

And so you cannot necessarily argue backward from the image to the real group. It is tempting to say that there must be some truth in these images of black people or American Indians; otherwise, why would they still be around? The answer to that question has to do with media's tendency to recycle images as long as they are commercially viable, as long as they satisfy some paying customers' fantasies. In our world, Othering is not only part of the language of imagery; it is also a fairly dependable way to make money, and that economic pressure helps explain why we continue to produce such images.

Throughout this chapter I have emphasized how difficult it is to represent the Other. I believe that the categories of "positive" and "negative" images are not helpful for discussion because actual images are so much more complicated than this artificial binary. We do a disservice to both the images and the group being represented by pressuring images to bear the burden of providing a "positive" representation. No one image can stand up to such pressure.

And yet I do believe that it is possible for us to make "progress" in representing the Other. Over time we can hope to widen the range of

representations from the “noble savages” favored by popular culture. No single image produced will be unabashedly positive, even if it is made by a mediamaker who belongs to that group. No mediamaker (whether Othered or mainstream) can fundamentally reinvent the language of imagery that they inherit (see Chapter 3 for more on this idea). My hope lies in broadening the range of representations of the Other and in the process of repetition. It takes time to reshape our conceptual categories, and this requires changes in both the quality and quantity of images of a group. Popular images are only part of how we construct our categories, of course, and our real-world interactions with Others also play a large role. But popular imagery’s participation in this process can be improved if we see a wide range of characters (from villains to heroes, from bit players to protagonists) repeated across a broad variety of media. Over time, using a variety of strategies, these admittedly imperfect images of the Other have the potential to overcome the magnetism of stereotypes to create a richer, more nuanced portrait of our world.

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