

## **OTHERNESS**

### **Cultural marginalization and devaluation**

*"Other" and "otherness" are technical terms used in the social sciences and humanities for the way people tend to view others (people or nature) that are dissimilar and separated. It is used in at least two different ways.*

*>> In some cases the terms are used in a general and neutral way to signify that which is fundamental different, as in my notion of "nature as sacred Other."*

*>> In other cases the terms imply a complex system of devaluation. The following are different but interrelated dimensions of this perspective.*

#### **Two basic meanings**

"Other" and "otherness" are technical terms used in the social sciences and humanities for the way people tend to view others (people or nature) that are dissimilar and separated.

1. In some cases the terms are used in a general and neutral way to signify that which is fundamental different, as in my notion of "nature as sacred Other."
2. In other cases they imply a complex system of devaluation. The following are different but interrelated dimensions of this perspective.

#### **1. Objectification**

- The Other is treated as "mere object". Inability or refusal to consider the other as a "subject," as part of one's community (of humans, etc.).
- *Social*: Headless women on a billboard; Native Americans as team logo.
- *Ecological*: Animals in factory farms; animals in advertisements (Chik-fil-A); nature as backdrop for selling SUVs.
- *>> Ecosocial response*: insist on the "other" as being a subject in itself and a part of the community

#### **2. Difference and separation**

- The Other is not like us. Inability or refusal to see similarity, continuity, etc.
- *Social*: Africans and Native Americans not seen as human beings.
- *Ecological*: We are separate from (and above) nature. Culture is not part of nature. Animals are machines that don't suffer.
- *>> Ecosocial response*: Point out similarity and continuity; see ourselves as animals and see language as wild; see animals as having intelligence and pain.

#### **3. The Same as Us**

- The Other is just like us. Inability or refusal to see difference and discontinuity.
- *Social*: The melting pot ideal. "The Western Tradition" and "human condition" as a single and undifferentiated; thus white males can speak for all.
- *Ecological*: Not usually applied to nature.
- *>> Ecosocial response*: point out the reality and significance of differences between Other and dominant group (and thus the need to study women and other cultures and give them a voice).

#### **4. Simplification**

- Inability or refusal to see the differences among members of the "Other" group.
- *Social*: "Oh, (blacks, women, etc.) are all the same."

- *Ecological*: “When you’ve seen one redwood tree, you’ve seen them all” (President Reagan). All wetlands are the same and therefore we can destroy one if we make another.
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Point out internal differences *within* the Other.

### 5. Unchanging

- Inability or refusal to see changes through time in a group. “We” can change and develop, but “they” can’t.
- *Social*: Native Americans had no history or development.
- *Ecological*: Ecosystems in climax as unchanging.
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Point out historical changes.

### 6. Passivity

- The Other is passive and receptive and lacks agency. Only the dominant group has the power to be active and affect things.
- *Social*: Women as passive, needing men to solve problems or help them or create culture.
- *Ecological*: We impact a passive nature that does not react to our control. We affect nature; nature doesn’t affect (e.g., teach or control) us.
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Point out examples of how supposedly passive social groups and nature are active, assertive, and affect the dominant group.

### 7. Invisibility

- Inability or refusal to recognize their actual existence.
- *Social*: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; no Hispanics in the media; historical model of NC farm with no women; the “New World” as “empty” (despite being populated by Native Americans).
- *Ecological*: maps with only roads and state boundaries; the “New World” as “empty” (despite being full of rich biological communities).
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Stress the reality, value, achievements, and difference of the Other; insist on its inclusion.

### 8. Lack of voice

- No voice, either in the sense of speaking/being heard or in the sense of power.
- *Social*: Lack of people of color or women authors in literary “canon”; lack of vote; white males in Congress, in corporate board rooms, as Hollywood directors.
- *Ecological*: Who speaks for the rights and welfare of animals, plants, and ecosystems?
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Allow other people to speak their experience (e.g., literature, journals) and ideas. Have certain people speak for the Other (but this is dangerous—can involve usurping the voice of the Other)

### 9. Abstract

- The Other is treated in a way that is divorced from its concrete actuality, individuality, and diversity, and divorced from the reality of the relationship between the Other and the dominant group.
- *Social*: “Women,” “the Third World,” “consumers”.
- *Ecological*: “Natural resources,” “Nature.”
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Recognize the concrete specificity of people and place

## 10. Devalued

- The other has no value, or there is only instrumental value to "us."
- *Social*: Women, blacks, etc., devalued in a wide variety of ways.
- *Ecological*: Nature has instrumental value only; nature without human labor mixed in is just "raw land" (John Locke)
- >> *Ecosocial response*: Insist on full and intrinsic value

## ANOTHERNESS

"Anotherness" is an alternative to the more common notion of Otherness. It has been developed out of the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, and applied to ecocriticism by Patrick D. Murphy. The basic point is that there is a third option, in addition to the extremes of (1) absorbing "them" so that their distinctness is not recognized and (2) the irreconcilable alienation and opposition between us and them found in Otherness

### 1. Subjecthood

- While an Other is mere object, Another retains the status as a subject with its own integrity and with which we interrelate as part of a community in some sense.
- *Social*: Signs in Civil Rights Movement: "I Am a Man."
- *Ecological*: Nature as "kin" in indigenous societies. Animistic views with nature seen as having its own life. Animals as "subjects of a life" (environmental philosophy).

### 2. Similarity & continuity

- There is no absolute difference as in Otherness. Another is in some way like us even while it is different. There is no absolute separation or essential alienation but rather some kind continuity with Another.
- *Social*: Strong sense of shared humanity. The racial or gender boundary is permeable.
- *Ecological*: Animals have certain types of intelligence and emotion. Chinese view that all of nature is made of *qi* ("chi"). "No ontological divide" between humans and nonhuman nature (deep ecology). Humans are not essentially alienated from nature.

### 3. Distinctness

- While there is similarity and continuity, Another retains its own distinctness. It is not reducible to or absorbable in us, as in some cases of Otherness.
- *Social*: The distinctiveness of the experience of other social groups (e.g., women, minorities, non-Western people) is recognized and valued. A recognition that literature of white males
- *Ecological*: Anthropomorphism of nature is rejected, or at least qualified. Nature is not just a cultural construct, but has a quality of life distinct from human life.

### 4. Complexity

- Another is recognized as having internal differences and complexity, rather than being all the same.
- *Social*: The social group is recognized as including all different kinds of people.
- *Ecological*: Each ecosystem (e.g., each wetland) is unique. Nature has more complexity than our minds can grasp.

## **5. Changeability**

- Another has complexity and difference over time – it is capable of change – rather than seen as simple over time and thus unchanging.
- *Social*: Social groups, including “primitives,” undergo change.
- *Ecological*: Ecosystems and species change, even ecosystems at “climax.”

## **6. Agency**

- Another has its own agency. It isn't passive in the face of our actions, and it isn't (at least completely) dependent on us for action.
- *Social*: Members of every social group are capable of their own agency and are not helpless or passive.
- *Ecological*: Nature can teach us and can change us, and can (to a degree) heal itself.

## **7. Visibility**

- The existence of Another is recognized and recognizable, rather than invisible.
- *Social*: The social group is visible in media, among political representatives, etc.
- *Ecological*: We no longer see nature as in a roadmap but as in a topographic map with details of vegetation and water flow. Nature is not simply a background.

## **8. Voice**

- Another has its own voice, which is given an opportunity to be heard. If it does not have a human voice (in the case of nonhuman nature), somehow its voice is given representation.
- *Social*: The social group is given a voice in politics, in the arts, in academia, etc.
- *Ecological*: Somehow we “hear” the voice of animals, plants, and ecosystems. Environmental groups can speak for nature. Shamans can give voice to nature.

## **9. Concrete and specific**

- Another is no abstraction but rather a concrete reality.
- *Social*: We see each person as a unique individual, rather than as a stereotype or simply as a member of a group.
- *Ecological*: Each animal, plant, and ecosystem is recognized as unique. “Nature” is not a general abstraction (“Nature doesn't care if we dam the river”) but is an actual field of individual beings.

## **10. Value**

- Another has intrinsic value rather than mere instrumental value. There may, however, be some sense of hierarchy of value.
- *Social*: Every social group and member of the group has intrinsic value.
- *Ecological*: Nature has intrinsic value.