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1. THEORIZING THE CULTURAL BORDERLANDS

Imag(in)ing “Them” and “Us”

INTRODUCTION

When you have to call about a utilities bill and the call centre keeps you on hold for ten minutes, do you draw? Doodle? Me, I fill scraps of paper with long, looping flowers and squat, fat cats with long whiskers. What about when you’re waiting for someone on a dusty road and you happen to have a long stick to hand: do you sweep patterns into the dirt? I draw swoops and spirals, the patterns of soaring seagulls and walks I’m yet to take. These are not really drawings of anything, they’re movements, habituated actions. One could, undoubtedly, read meaning into my unthinking lines, but (or because?) they’re not entirely conscious; I do not aim to communicate meaning to anyone beyond myself. Indeed, if I do want to communicate, I have plenty of other tools at my disposal: I can use language (several, in fact). I can dress a certain way or wear specific shoes. I can show through the paralinguistic subtleties of gesture, posture or facial expression how I feel.

As adults, many of us rarely draw beyond these kinds of swooping, looping doodles, perhaps because we have no need (or no talent? or it is not culturally all that common?) to communicate through visual art. But many, perhaps most, children create visual art across diverse cultures, and many will imbue their creations with meaning (Alland, 1983). This is not to say that children have no other recourses for meaning making; drawing is just one way of depicting the world and one’s place within it. But children’s art offers a window both into the minds of individuals and their socialization environments (Bertoia, 1993; Gernhardt, Rübeling, & Keller, 2013; Hall, 2010; Lorenzi-Cioldi, et al., 2011; Rübeling, et al., 2011).

As a parallel to this, I draw cats because I like them and because they are common animals in my environment. My cats are stylized, influenced by other cat depictions in my culture, including cartoon cats such as Jim Davis’s ‘Garfield’ and Simon Tofield’s ‘Simon’s cat’. I also know that cats have whiskers and so I draw them in, even though, when I look at a cat, its whiskers are not necessarily visible, and other animals have whiskers too. But in my mind cats are all about the whiskers, so my (conventional) drawing of a cat has long, obvious whiskers. So although ‘my’ doodled cats are ‘mine’, they are also products of my culture's relationship with cats and they are influenced by the way my culture relates to, and depicts, cats (in particular) and the natural world (in general). My cat, for instance, sits on a mat.
rather than prowling the Australian outback in search of small, hopping marsupials to
devour; my cultural view of cats is cozy domestication rather than rural destruction.
So while my doodles, perhaps, allow an insight to my individual mind, they also,
perhaps more significantly, offer an insight into my culture. The same is true of
children’s drawings.

This chapter is not mainly about children's drawings, however. This chapter, like
the book as a whole, is mainly about intercultural relations. Children’s drawings
simply provide data about how Culture A sees both itself and Culture B, and vice
versa. Additionally, the intercultural interfaces in the contexts discussed in later
chapters is of a specific kind: that between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people
in myriad global contexts. This chapter therefore provides a theoretical background
to later discussions: an overview is given of (intersectional) ‘cultural’ identities and
the construction and uses of Others in defining (and feeling good about) the Self.
As examples of these processes that may perhaps be termed ‘Selfing’ (a little used
term) and ‘Othering’ (a widely used term), I draw in this chapter on a wide variety of
historical and geographically diverse cases: contemporary British Internet memes,
1960s New Englander constructions of imagined ‘Russians’, ancient Athenian
pottery depictions of Thracians and ‘Amazons’, 1950s US American identity
work through imagined science fiction futures, ancient and contemporary Chinese
notions of (racialized) Self and Others, and intersectional identity constructions of
Indigenous Peruvians in contemporary urban novels from Lima.

CULTURAL DESCRIPTIONS AS CULTURAL PRODUCTS

In early 2014, a series of Internet memes appeared called “British people problems”.
Tongue-in-cheek, these “problems of excessive politeness” included the following:

• I don’t feel well but I don’t want to disturb my doctor.
• Having my hair cut, the barber said, ‘Is that alright?’ I nodded. It wasn’t.
• A man in the supermarket was browsing the food I wanted to browse, so I had to
pretend to look at things I didn’t even want until he left.
• Yesterday, I arrived at a mini roundabout simultaneously with two other drivers
from other directions. We’re still here.
• I live outside the UK so when I say ‘with all due respect’ nobody realises I’m
insulting them (The Meta Picture, 2014).

These extreme (and yet oh so everyday!) non-confrontational behaviours,
putatively ‘typical’ British and funny because they are so recognizably familiar, are
examples of an important discourse type within intercultural relations: cultural self-
descriptions.

Online social space, including social media such as Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram,
and Flickr, can be theorized, in Habermasian terms, as public sphere (Chen, 2012).
This is a discursive space in which social ‘realities’ are negotiated and constructed.