Breaking the Mold, Orientalism and *The Sympathizer*

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Western society obsesses over the excessive categorization of individuals. The United States is a prime example of how this fixation accelerates community division and expands prejudice. Although social constructs like race and gender have become so intertwined in American society that their effects are commonly overlooked, they continue to create bias against societal groups. Academics like Edward Said and Jean-François Staszak studied this process, identifying its cause to be the over-emphasis on the traits held by a certain set of people. This emphasis allows certain groups to bond through their shared attributes, leaving others loosely and negatively defined by the traits defined by the dominant group. Professor Kristen Hoerl outlines the reason these societal inequalities persist, reasoning that the dominant group in a given society redirects attention on minority issues back towards themselves. By applying their research on dominant culture formation and its influence on the behavior of minorities, we can better understand and ideally reverse the processes that created the foundation for the societal turmoil we struggle with today.

In his research paper, "Other/otherness," Jean-François Staszak explains that, together with a power dynamic, accentuating the differences between societal groups creates minority groups with harmful labels attached to them. These labels are what allow damaging societal expectations to emerge. Staszak explains that within sociology, the 'other' exists as the generalization of another individual or group based on their noticeable differences when contrasted with one's own group.[1] In theory, 'othering' can be seen as beneficial, as it allows humans to characterize their surroundings despite their unfamiliarity. In reality, as power structures are nearly inescapable as societies progress, the 'other' is universally stigmatized. Rather than serve as a method to understand the unknown, it becomes a tool to benefit a dominant societal group through the separation placed between themselves and traits they deem negative. [2] This results in the negative traits being unnecessarily attributed to 'unfamiliar' minority groups, with their characterizations becoming deeper ingrained as society advances. One can predict that as a dominant societal force continues to stigmatize minority groups, what once was a mere misrepresentation becomes an expectation. Societal assumptions then pressure individuals into molds formed by those same expectations. These are constantly reaffirmed by the dominant group's influence, altering the social sentiment towards a comparatively vulnerable minority group. Just as repeated affirmation leads to expectation, social molds form due to the constant emphasis placed on differing characteristics.

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[1] "Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such" (Staszak).

[2] "dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined" (Staszak).

Orientalism, described by Edward Said, theorizes the consequences of othering on an international scale. Said identifies the harm in basing an entire culture on its juxtaposition with one's society. He explains how Western society evolves its study of Eastern culture through text and imagery that condescendingly accentuates their non-Western traits. He justifies this through his claim that both the 'orient' and the 'occident' do not exist in nature, with Eastern and Western concepts deriving their definitions from each other. [3] The two exist as labels with no inherent meaning without their opposites. Just as a king has no power without a subject to rule, the relationship between the 'occident' and the 'orient' is based on power rather than an academic interpretation of culture. Orientalist theory relates to othering due to the impact Eastern exoticism within Western culture has on the West's perception of the East. The movie extras' portrayal within the Vietnam war film in *The Sympathizer* illustrate the problems that emerge with the misinterpretation of Vietnamese culture. The extras' barbaric actions exemplify the way Western culture associates non-Western cultures with incivility. The film's American director distorts his audience's view of Vietnamese culture by exaggerating the extras' screams and savage war tactics. The direct intersection between the Western mold and the subjected group influences the auteur's artistic choices. Said asserts that societies that incorrectly characterize Eastern culture create the framework for othering within orientalism. He explains that the constant Western comparison is what creates harmful false generalizations. [4] Considering Said's explanation when analyzing the conflict between the director and the Vietnamese actors, it is evident that the damage caused by an international mold is not limited to the society in which it was created, establishing societal molds as a social construct as well as an internalized mindset.

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer,* the narrator's relationship with the auteur during his participation in a Vietnam war-based film reveals the ways exoticism reinforces the negative perceptions of Vietnamese people. While he works to represent Vietnamese culture within the film more accurately, the narrator constantly clashes with the auteur's defensive nature, as he is often unwilling to alter his artistic vision, unconcerned with the film's authenticity. [5] Only using the narrator to assure himself of his dedication to creating a film that "will be the war," the auteur portrays Vietnam in a way that denies Vietnamese people a legitimate say in their own representation. [6] Instead, he directs his interpretation through a Western lens, transformed by the Eastern exoticism developed in the West. Comparing Said's orientalism framework with the auteur's arrogance leads us to identify the first step to reducing the overgeneralization of Eastern culture, which begins with representing Eastern cultures in a way that does not base its analysis on Western elements.

Within the film produced in Nyguen's *The Sympathizer*, despite the narrator's intentions to advocate for the accurate representation of his culture, he fails to identify the source of the film's cultural misrepresentation, causing him to strengthen the Western mold created by negative Vietnamese characterizations. The narrator quickly notices the Vietnamese soldiers' dehumanization, which he attributes to the auteur's usage of Vietnamese film extras as a backdrop for negative human traits, emphasizing the American soldiers' heroism. Painted as

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[3] "I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either …" (Said).

[4] " … but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient" (Said).

[5] "A know-it-all who doesn't know anything, an idiot savant minus the savant" (Nguyen).

[6] (Nyguen, 178)

indispensable tools for the American good, the extras are forced to "die more than once," as there are too few extras to suitably display America's overwhelming military superiority.[7] While the American soldiers' deaths are portrayed as incredibly tragic, "dying in slow motion," viewers are meant to feel content watching extras die over and over again, as the world is slowly freed from a backward Eastern culture.[8] The narrator is justifiably angered by the way the film artificially dehumanizes his people, as the film creates a mold designed to relegate them to mere screaming animals whose only purpose is to serve as a constant enemy to American dominance. Spurred by his anger, he inadvertently participates in the Vietnamese actors' generalization by reducing them to a single oppressed group, leading him to "[speak] up on behalf of the extras in regards to their salary," believing it to be a stride towards equality among the actors.[9] He unknowingly becomes an additional force driving the extras into the artificial Western mold introduced by the auteur. The narrator's misguidedness represents the difficulties faced when attempting to deconstruct a societal mold, requiring one to identify its power source; the narrator mistakenly believes the source to be the inequality among Vietnamese and American actors. He unintentionally facilitates the actors' cultural misrepresentation, as the Vietnamese actors' increased participation strengthens the Western mold established by the auteur. With the main focus of their role being the reinforcement of a warped Western view, higher Vietnamese involvement directly relates to increased misrepresentation. The narrator's actions illustrate how condensing a group to a single attribute contributes to othering. Even while attempting to help the Vietnamese actors, he sought to analyze them through his own generalizations, which only distanced him from the reality of the situation.

Kristen Hoerl's *Remembering Radical Black Dissent* provides a solution to societally ingrained othering, which is achieved by decreasing the number of minority issues that are overlooked. Historical minority rights campaigns like the civil rights movement extended their reach through Western society, influencing Hollywood movies and providing prominent leaders with an international stage. A common occurrence in post-civil rights media was the '"anti-racist-white-hero" films,' which often included a white protagonist civil rights hero.[10] If protest from the minority gained societal traction, the 'white savior' was used to redirect attention towards the dominant societal group, which led to a deceptive form of othering. The white savior disguised itself as compassion from the dominant societal group within the civil rights movement. In reality, it only emphasized their dominance by highlighting the minority as people in desperate need of saving. Their portrayal as people unable to properly advocate for themselves is shown through the media's characterization of the civil rights movement, which was made out to be "menacing, violent, and unreasonable."[11] Labeling a minority struggle as a chaotic movement supported the group's societally ingrained negative connotations, which was the source of their stigma. An interesting parallel can be made between society's treatment of the 1960s civil rights movement and the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. The redirected focus from African Americans' fair treatment by law enforcement towards the incivility of rioters assisted in the movement's misrepresentation. In many ways, society succeeded in transforming the simple concept of equality into a movement driven by senseless violence, allowing its core

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[7] (Ngyuen, 175)
[8] (Nguyen, 177)
[9] (Nguyen, 129)
[10] Hoerl
[11] Hoerl

values to fade from public view. Hoerl explains that reversing the effects caused by othering can only be done by intentionally unearthing "hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives."[12] Unity is brought about through acknowledging even the most horrendous instances of minority oppression, as, without accountability, the distortion of events only increases, fueling the misrepresentation that othering feeds on.

The constant pressure exerted by society is often inescapable; however, it is up to us as individuals to decide how we allow that pressure to change our character and mindset. Both Said and Staszak outline the factors that contribute to societal othering; however, creating a completely new society void of its effects is not possible. Instead, we must analyze the framework they have outlined and aim to break the societal molds that have allowed our society to become divided. It is important to remain conscious of the individuals within each group, as Nguyen illustrates how othering can occur through generalizations, even if minority group interests are in mind. Modern-day struggles for equal rights are unfortunate examples of how marginalized group movements are disregarded thanks to hasty generalizations. Movements like fourth-wave feminism have been painted as groups of angry misandrists, unsure of their own objective, while Black Lives Matter protesters have been presented solely as violent rioters. As individuals, we can choose to accept the generalized interpretations fed to us by society, or we can seek to find the truth behind group struggles. Put simply, without free thought within a society that molds individuals to fit its twisted perceptions, one only aligns oneself with its backward views. The burden falls on the dominant societal group members to realize the societal factors that benefit themselves and harm others. Only then can they better understand and potentially aid in minority struggle.

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[12] Hoerl