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Pieterjan Bosmans & Ciaran Van Hoeserlande

“*We agree to our work being used (anonymously) for research, training and assessment purposes*.”

**Otherization (by Pieterjan Bosmans)**

Two years ago, during the summer holiday, my mom and I went on a trip to Sicily. One evening we went to an Italian restaurant which was recommended by our hotel. When we arrived, we saw that it was very busy and nearly all the tables were filled. There was a lot of noise and it seemed very chaotic. Apparently something had gone wrong with our reservation. Because of this, the waiters put down an extra table right next to a couple (Joe and Amy) who were each around sixty years old. As a result of everybody in the restaurant having loud conversations and us being seated right next to this couple, my mom and I started a conversation with them.

In the beginning of the conversation we told them we were from Belgium. Amy was surprised by this because after hearing my English she thought we were from the United Kingdom. She told us she knew some Belgians who speak French and that their English was pretty bad because they had a French accent. Later on Joe asked me why I was not drinking any beer. I told him I only drink beer whenever I go to a party or when I am at a bar with my friends but not when I am eating. In a way he ignored my answer because he went on and advised me to try the beers they had in the restaurant. Joe said that they tasted very similar to Belgian beer. As the conversation continued, we talked about all the different places we have visited. They named a lot of countries situated in Europe but I noticed they had not yet visited Belgium. Therefore I asked them if they had any plans in the future to do so. Amy simply answered “Not really, I do not think there is a lot to see over there.” I tried to convince them by naming some iconic cities and activities which they could participate in but they just laughed a bit. The last thing I remember was that during some point in the conversation I told Joe and Amy that I thought it is crazy how in America you can buy guns and have them laying around your house. I said it would be better to ban this because of all the shootings that happen over there. I do not remember their response however.

At the time, I thought that they did not know a lot about Belgium because they lived in America. When Joe asked me why I was not drinking any beer, I actually thought this was a very stereotypical question to ask a Belgian. There is a very known stereotype about Belgium and that it is only known for its beer, chocolate and French fries. I was also a bit frustrated because they thought Belgium was not a country worth visiting. Looking back at this conversation, it is clear to me that Amy and Joe had formed a stereotype about Belgium and Belgian people. The only Belgians Amy knows speak French and their English is not very good. Now it is also clear to me that telling them the gun laws in America are crazy is a very stereotypical thing to say. I probably said this because at that time there was a lot of media coverage about a mass shooting in a nightclub in Orlando. This encounter has made an influence on me because now I think it is pretty funny that when people from different nationalities meet, they often say stereotypical things about each other. I also learned it is hard to look beyond these stereotypes and not form an opinion about one another before you know them.

The stereotyping during this encounter is the cause of otherization. This means that the foreign other is being reduced to less then what they are. These stereotypes are formed on how we receive information about other cultures. Amy only knew Belgians that speak French and therefor she assumed that all Belgians speak French and that their English is bad. Joe had formed a prejudice that all Belgians should drink beer whenever they can. Also I saw some articles about mass shootings in America and about their gun laws and because of this I formed the stereotype that all Americans have guns in their homes. These examples made us treat each other in a essentialist way. This means we reduce each other to less then what we are. We already have an image about one another before we actually know the other person. We should treat each other in a non-essentialist way because each culture cannot be reduced to some key factors.

**Representation (by Ciaran Van Hoeserlande)**

About five and a half years ago, August 2013, I moved to the United States of America because of my father’s work. I moved there together with my entire family except for my older sister, who decided she would finish her studies as midwife in Belgium. I was thirteen years old around that time, thus the perfect age to start high school. However, as one could expect from a boy on the brink of puberty, I felt treated unfairly. To me it felt like I was forced to come with, like this was some kind of selfish joke, like I had no say in the matter whatsoever. I wasn’t prepared to give up my friends, my hobbies, the life as I knew it just to start anew in some sizeable country overseas. Subsequently, the first thing I decided on when I set foot on American soil was to keep to myself for the entirety of our stay.

Of course, one knows that it is almost impossible to get through your studying years and keep one’s sanity without making friends. Well, as ignorant as I was, I thought that I could. The American students were sincerely interested in me, but all I did the first few weeks was push them away by being foul-mouthed as to make a point to my parents that I wanted to move back to Belgium. Naturally my parents could not simply return to Belgium and so I soon learned that it would be beneficial to me if I opened up to the people welcoming me in their country. I started talking and connecting to different individuals. To my surprise, however, almost everything I learned about these people did not align with my prejudices of the American population. As a result, I thought about my perceptions and looked for the source of these misconceptions.

I traced these misconceptions back to the years before I lived in the USA; As a kid, I often used to watch the news and American movies. They would almost always depict the USA as a land of opportunity where overweight persons and successful business (wo)men alike could live the so-called American Dream. Based on those sources I formulated opinions about a culture I had never even had come in contact with. Looking back at it now, I feel absurd and simple-minded for ever doing that.

Thus, like a lot of other people, I fell into the trap of shaping a distorted image about another culture due to the misrepresentation by media sources. In the process, however, I did learn a lot about the role of media in communicating culture in society. First of all, I noticed that the media is likely to take certain frequently occurring yet unique elements of a culture and blow them up to make them look more prominent than they actually are. This way they show only shimmers of the culture and risk stigmatizing and narrowing the culture down to a few aspects which overshadow all of the lesser-known aspects. For example, I honestly believed more than half of the American population were seriously overweight and constantly eating fast food. When I lived in America, I observed that a lot of people were actually very healthy and sporty and that only a few persons were severely obese. Secondly, depictions of a culture by media sources are often subject to interpretation and subjectivity, so they should all be taken with a grain of salt. As said earlier, I was surprised to learn that my perceptions of the American population, which were fed to me by European media and could be argued to be the perceptions of other people, did not align with the actuality of the situation. Which leads me to the final thing I learned; it goes to show that every individual is unique even if they are part of a collective culture and that it is unacceptable to derive one’s personality from a culture and vice versa.

To this day I still have quite a few people asking me what the USA is really like and if it is anything like what is shown in movies. Because I now know from my own experience how, besides media, professional discourses and everyday language can portray a wrong idea of a culture to another person, I usually tell them to take a trip there and look for themselves.