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Synthesis Essay

"A window is a window, but there is looking out and looking in" says Margaret Atwood at the beginning of her short story "Homelanding". With this observation, the challenge of establishing identity is addressed. Identity is shaped by what we know we are and by what we know we are not. The exclusion of traits in our own identity becomes the fodder for the identity of the "Other"- the being that is definitively outside one's self. This differentiation is the foundation for the "us and them" division and is the backdrop for both Atwood's short story and Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home". Both authors defamiliarize our identity as humans, placing what we know to be true about ourselves in unfamiliar contexts. The authors take our language, the most intimate of our assumed identities, and use it as the tool for defamiliarization therefore reverse engineering our understanding of "us and them". Ultimately the authors turn away from the popular tradition of defining The Other only through the dissimilar and instead expose similarities between the narrator's identity and the other identity. It is through these pieces' desperate need to convey an identity that the reader is challenged to re-imagine his or her own identity within the framework of the alien eye.

Of course, the alien eye is relative because, "there is looking out and looking in" and neither story distinctly says which side of the window the reader is on. This deliberate ambiguity is the first step in reimagining identity. We read the stories unsure of just which side we're supposed to be on and are therefore allowed to get swept up in the experience of the story. Everything is vaguely familiar, yet new enough to excite the reader into learning about this

culture that is oh-so-strange. It is only halfway through the reader realizes these descriptions are of what we know to be our own culture- pieces of our own identity. Fresh perception to our habitual identity is restored via defamiliarization. For example: "…We cocoon ourselves, become lethargic, and spend much of our time hiding in crevices. Our mouths shrink and we say little" (Atwood, 795). Here we experience anew what an alien eye sees as literal change to something we know to be metaphorical. The literal expression of this change allows us to rethink our internal metamorphosis, what it must look like to others and to what extent this literal description is true. Raine's poem is starkly unfamiliar and almost humorous in its audacious defamiliarization. But there is grace in his audacity: with the simple passage, "At night…they…read about themselves / in colour" Raine reframes the literal meaning of dreaming and metaphorically suggests that as a culture we are living in black and white; living within the limitations of only two hues, only two sides. This juxtaposition of the literal and metaphorical brilliantly persuades us to see through the alien eye and helps the reader to objectivity in establishing identity.

The strongest shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar in Raine's and Atwood's pieces is in their beautiful use of language. These stories' language drives home the defamiliarization and thus re-imagining of personal identity. Language is the main medium of connection to another and by our language we display most of our individuality. When expressing thoughts to an unfamiliar audience words are chosen carefully and thoroughly so that mutual understanding is established; because of this language is invaluable and deeply intimate. The authors exploit this intimacy, playing on our inherent comprehension of language to draw the reader in with unfamiliar syntax and to turn language on its head with heavy use of trope. Raine's poem is thick with wordplay, introducing new words such as "Caxtons" and new contexts for such common

things as mist, rain and vehicles: “Mist is when the sky is tired of flight / and rests its soft machine on the ground” (Raine, st. 4). Raine uses literalized yet imaginative language to describe the nature of familiar things (giving backbone to the overall defamiliarization) and reverse engineer our understanding of them. Both Raine and Atwood struggle to express the “hows” and the “whys” of things through, and to, an alien eye to convey mutual, albeit cumbersome, understanding among the narrator, the audience and the reader. The narrators write with a desperate need for understanding, carefully detailing objects, intentions, psychologies and traditions in almost-coherent language; language that is in between ours and someone else’s. Atwood directly addresses this with her audience by saying “if it weren’t for this I would have stopped trying long ago, to communicate with you in this halfway language” (Atwood, 796). It is the language itself that functions heartily, delicately and in the end gracefully, bringing two sides to a common ground. Atwood writes with permeating empathy towards The Other, seeking to help them understand her alien culture. Raine also writes with the singular purpose to be understood, but with curiosity and an exploratory tone towards The Other. Through the authors’ imaginatively constructed language the reader is allowed to look with fresh, perhaps alien, eyes at preconceived identity. Defamiliarization is solidified through pragmatic use of language, creating novel perspectives and sympathetic understanding between two sides.

This pervasive need to be understood rings through both Atwood’s story and Raine’s poem. If nothing else these narrators seek both their own understanding and their readers’ understanding. The authors slowly build this overarching question mark in the stories through first defamiliarizing our own identity, expressing it freshly with unconventional language and finally through presenting intrinsic similarities. This is ironic in the tradition of “othering”. Traditionally, “othering” is established by listing differences between two peoples, or at least

listing differences from a singular standpoint. Atwood instead finds distinct similarities between the narrator and her audience: “It’s this knowledge of death, which we share, where we overlap. Death is our common ground. Together, on it, we can walk forward” (Atwood, 796). A kind of macabre kinship is formed on the knowledge of mortality, a shared humility in the face of death. It would appear that in order for identities to have meaning they must be finite- they must end. They must be precious, they must be earned and above all they must be perceived by others. These fundamental commonalities further erase the division between Us and Them, allowing us through shared experience to perceive another identity and have ours reciprocated. Shared experience fosters understanding which, in the end, engenders empathy.

The Other becomes less “other” once we establish common ground, and it is through reexamining our own identity that we find common ground. Once we understand ourselves we can define, and then understand, The Other. However, the great irony is that one is contingent upon the other (no pun intended); we usually shape our personal identities by outlining what we are not, thus perpetuating exclusion. In the end these sides are only relative in relation to their opposites; neither identity can exist without the other’s definition. In this duality, we find common ground: one may not know if one is looking out or in, but everyone can agree that it is a window they are looking at regardless of side.