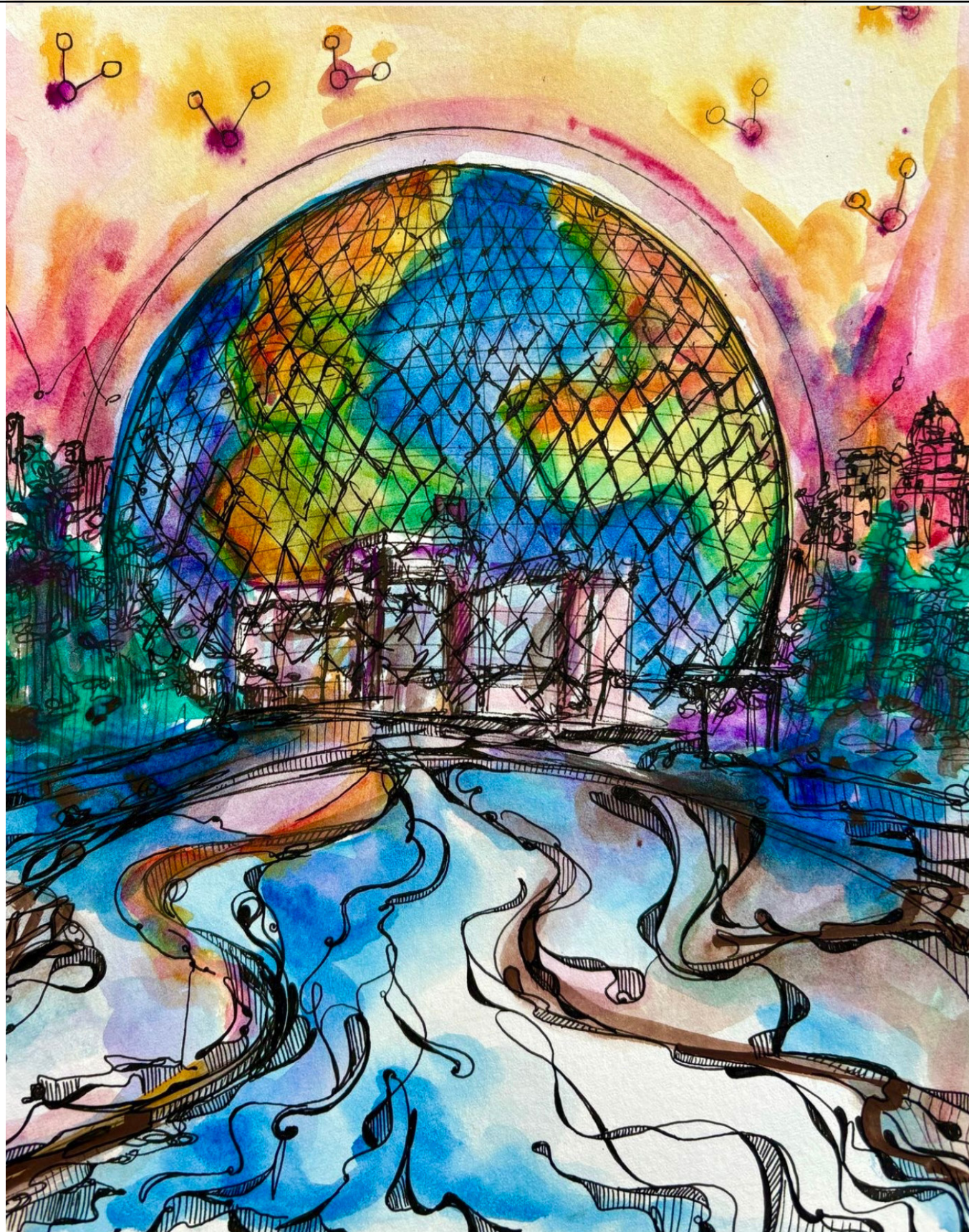


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# As Fractures in Global Health Deepen, Combating ‘Othering’ Is a Must

*Shashika Bandara<sup>\*1</sup>, and Isabel Muñoz Beaulieu<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Global and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

<sup>2</sup>Department of Family Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

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\*Correspondence: Shashika Bandara; Email: shashika.bandara@mcgill.ca

In 2020, during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, writer and activist Arundati Roy said “the pandemic is a portal” reflecting on how the humankind can emerge from the pandemic to a different and a better world of our making [1]. However, as we all know, the opposite happened. Vaccine inequity, clear prioritization of lives of those in high-income countries (HICs) and lack of accountability from state actors and global institutions defined the pandemic response [2-3]. We are now faced with an even more dire status quo, where political forces aim to dismantle global public health by gutting the existing multilateral efforts and by sowing discord and division among communities [4–6]. USA, the largest funder in global health, has cut off funding from its main international development arm, the USAID [7] and other global organizations such as Gavi, the vaccine alliance [8]. USA has showcased its isolationist policy agenda by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and from the World Health Organization (WHO) [9]. As many have noted this will result in countless deaths and affect vulnerable communities often in economically poor settings [5,10]. The Trump administration is also actively labeling equity advocates as enemies, hunting them down with force—especially affecting minority populations and international students [6,11]. While Trump maybe the recent flagbearer for destructive isolationism of HICs, the USA is not the only country taking this path of cutting aid [12-13] and fueling anti-immigrant/minority sentiments [14].

A central tenet of these policies impacting global health and their advocacy, is division created by ‘othering’. Othering aims to break the connectedness between communities, marking individuals and groups different (often inferior) than the dominant social group [15-16]. Othering can be built on existing social divisions of class, race, skin color, religion, sexual and gender identity, citizenship, and more [15-16]. It is reasonable to say that we are caught up in an information and policy epidemic that pits us against each other – using our differences. Thus, increasingly the value of the lives and/or opinions of another community is often met with lack of empathy, dismissal or worse, vitriol. This is perhaps the strongest possible enemy to the human and planetary wellbeing. Borrowing Roy’s words, we seemed to be going through these challenging times, “dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us” (1).

***The purpose of this editorial, therefore, is to put a red flag on these social, political and policy pathways of othering as a tool for power - and invite you to be a changemaker.***

By raising this red flag, we hope to combat complacency and call for active engagement in anti-othering efforts. We can start within our own social circles at McGill, expanding to Québec, to Canada and then globally. The key is to start somewhere and recognize we have created enemies of minorities within our own communities, in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and have rationalized deaths due to disease or destruction as an inevitability of the status quo. We invite you to challenge the helplessness you may feel and channel the deep discomfort into efforts of combating othering. We offer three main considerations for pathways forward. First, is centering kindness in our engagements in anti-othering. Second, is a commitment to listening and unlearning. Finally, we ask to you strongly consider becoming an active advocate – to combat anti-othering across the board.

## ***Centering kindness to combat othering***

Recognizing that these are times of acute mental and emotional exhaustion due to social and economic pressures, compounded by man-made and natural disasters, is an essential first step. Existing pressures on our lives and the global crises constantly present in our news feed can lead to lessening of empathy and kindness [17]. However, to build anti-othering efforts, a foundational step is to bank on kindness and to navigate with empathy [18]. Differing opinions, differing cultural values, different educational status or any other differences should not be the basis for rapid disagreement and our acts of holding others accountable can still be built upon kindness. So, we ask for introspection and effort in building your capacity for kindness. This applies to engaging those with differing values and also those with similar values but different views on what solutions can be. It is necessary to recognize collaborators and allies are not a monolith and have diversity of opinion.

## ***Commitment to listening and unlearning***

The necessity for listening and unlearning has been recognized before, especially in relation to equity efforts [19]. It involves proactively learning from others with humility and curiosity. However, commitment to listening and un-learning is not an altruistic act. It is an essential skill that is relevant for growth in career and effective engagement in your day to day lives



as well [20]. Therefore, our ask is to reframe listening and unlearning as a self-development exercise, rather than or in addition to, an effort to combat othering in society. Once you develop listening and unlearning as a key skill for your self-growth, you can open yourself up to the differing views and allow space for re-learning or leaving harmful framings of people or situations behind. This development will also strengthen your capacity to be kinder, a consideration we highlighted above. Most importantly, the capacity to listen and unlearn will allow us to recognize the fault lines in our systems that reinforce harmful ways of othering.

### ***Stand-up against othering – activate, advocate and agitate***

This is not a drill. The times we live in require your active participation in combating othering. Building on the above two essential skills of centering kindness and building capacity for unlearning, it is necessary for all of us to build a counterculture against othering. We need to go out of our way to explain the necessity for equity, to combat harmful perpetuation of stereotypes, and to listen to the voices that are marginalized. To the extent possible, we also need to combat our inclination to play it safe or take an approach maintaining silence for personal convenience. We implore you to leverage your privileges (of citizenship, skin color, education, positions of leadership etc.) to stand for those who may not be able to be as vocal or are under scrutiny. Those affected could include your own peers in your classroom, workplace or neighborhood – simply based on their citizenship status, racial or ethnic identity, religion or views expressed. Despite the overwhelming shifts in social or political norms, we must not fall victim to helplessness within ourselves. It will be important to remind ourselves that courage is infectious and that your act of courage will light up another's capacity to be courageous.

In closing, we want to recognize the enormous mental and emotional energy that is required in efforts of countering othering—especially when going against the status quo. However, based on our experiences, we also know that there is joy in building these efforts together, in forming these communities that rise above the divisive rhetoric and prioritize wellbeing of each other. We believe that the portal Arundati Roy mentioned is still open and that we can push our world towards a more united future and a future where we do not allow othering to be weaponized. The wellbeing of our species and our planet depends on it.

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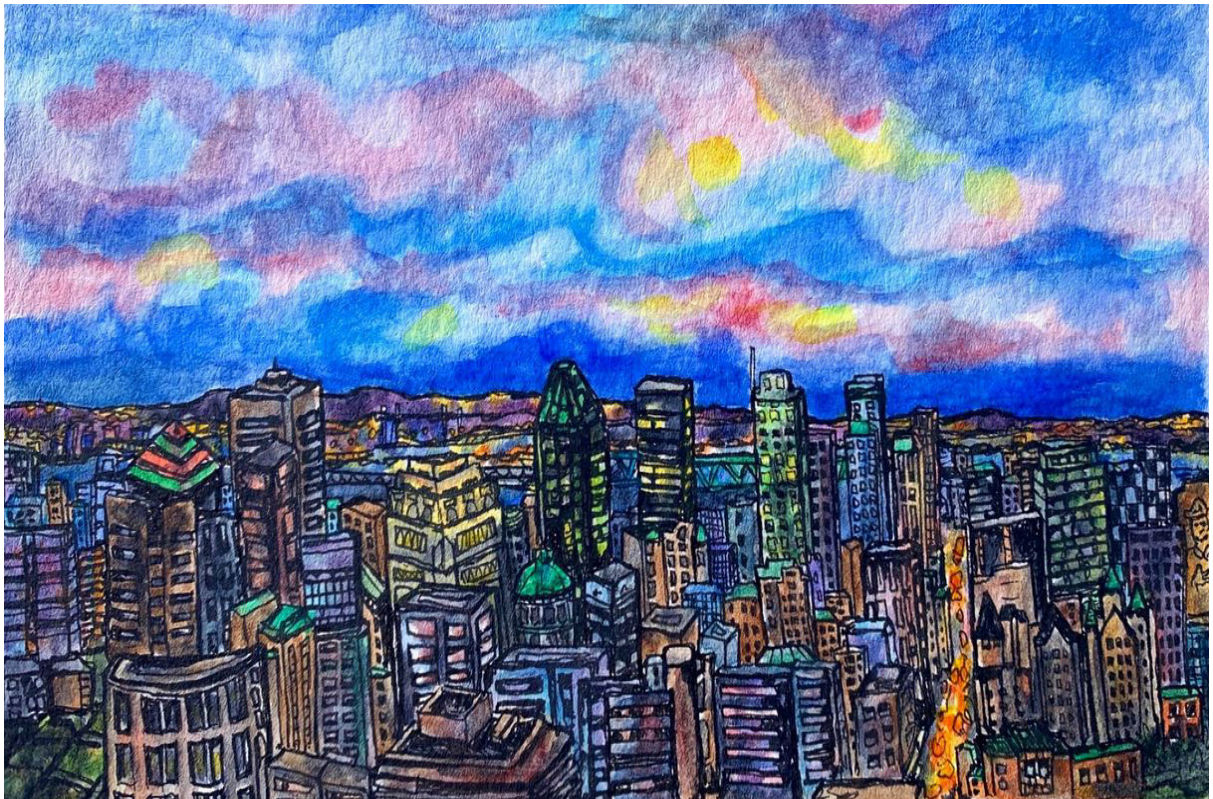
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