# Studying alterity

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*Published in:*
Alterity, identity, image

*Publication date:*
1991

# STUDYING ALTERITY: BACKGROUNDS AND PERSPECTIVES

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All human cultures articulate, situate themselves by categorizing the world. Such a predicative act necessarily involves a distinction between that which is allowed into the sphere of culture, and that which is excluded; the circumscription of cultural identity proceeds by silhouetting it against a contrastive background of Otherness. It is this Otherness, both created by, and providing the cognitive background to, articulations of cultural identity (in ethnic, sexual or other terms), which was the topic of an interdisciplinary conference held at Amsterdam in the autumn of 1988 under the joint auspices of the Dutch Sociological and Anthropological Association (NSAV) and the University of Amsterdam's Department of European Studies. This book presents, in reworked versions, the papers discussed on that occasion.

The articulation of culture can be traced in all societies and periods. Various ethnic groups apply to themselves a name which is cognate or even synonymous with the word for *human* or *a user of language*, implicitly arrogating for the social in-group this fundamental human *proprium* and relegating outsiders and aliens to the status of inferior semi-humans. The name for *stranger* can often be synonymous with that for *enemy*, *slave* or *one who blabs gibberish*. What is more, leadership structures within most societies stipulate certain requirements (age, sex, descent) to which a given individual must conform before being given a position of authority; so that here, too, human dignity is distributed unequally between an elite and its Others.

That tendency can be traced in Indo-European vocabulary and institutions as elucidated by Émile Benveniste;[1] in the classical European tradition it is compounded by the specifically civic virtues current in Greece and Rome. Greek society saw its cultural identity and superiority manifested mainly in the institution of the *polis*, and classical Rome developed that human ideal of civic virtue which Cicero so resoundingly formulated into perhaps the central aspect of Rome's bequest to subsequent European civilization. 'Civic', that is, as in the socially regulated life of cities (so far superior to the nomadic or irregular life of rustics); and 'virtue' in the classical sense of Roman *virtus*, which sees in the self-control, courage and 'manliness' of the adult/mature male the ideal type of human values.

This formulation of cultural values already marginalizes a number of human types: strangers, children, women, rustics, brutes and those who cannot control their passions. The inferiorization of this type of excluded Others, who fall short of the canonized set of cultural values, remains a constant throughout the development of European thought, up to and including Freud (cf. Corbey's contribution).

To be sure, the articulation of cultural identity in these terms does not *by definition* imply a denigration of the Other. As Cieraad traces in her contribution, and as Lovejoy and Boas have shown in their classic study on *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, there has from the earliest times onwards been an appreciative mode of viewing Otherness: the appreciation of artlessness, of innocence, of freedom from social constraints. The encounter with strangers can result, not only in hostile mistrust and denigration, but also in admiration for the (universally positive) virtue of hospitality. The Odyssey, for instance, is one long testimony to the idea that hospitality towards strangers is a central marker of true positive humanity, regardless of cultural or social background.

But in a world fraught with dangers and uncontrollable incident, the more current mode of encountering the Other is a defensive one. The

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[1]     *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris, 1969) traces, in the examples of Indo-European tribal appellations such as *arya* and *slav*, a fundamental ethnocentrism and sense of in-group superiority vis-à-vis aliens. 'Dans le nom qu'un peuple se donne il y a, manifeste ou non, l'intention de se distinguer des peuples voisins, d'affirmer cette supériorité qu'est la possession d'une langue commune et intelligible' (p. 368).

unknown is by definition a threat to one's cognitive grip on the world; it is the locus for fantasies about uncouth monsters and dangerous adventures: that uncomfortable fantasmagoria runs from, again, the Odyssey to the speculative geography of Pliny and Solinus. Strange lands are strange in a double sense: unfamiliar and weird.

The expansion of European control over the geographic environment, which took place at a time when the Ciceronian notions of civic virtue and progressive superiority were revived, thus goes hand in hand with an attempt to subdue the strangeness of the Other in cognitive terms. Civility is articulated in a double sense: brought into being by having it discursively formulated, and given a discriminatory distribution by having it assigned in varying degrees to different parts of the world or different spheres of society.

The exclusion and subjection of Otherness thus forms a red thread throughout European intellectual and political history. The treatment of medieval rustics, of nineteenth-century proletarians, of Jews, of natives in distant colonies, of homosexuals, of blacks, of women, of madmen: in all these multifarious instances the history of social (inter)action can be seen in its underlying structures if we see it in terms of the accompanying discourse, that of the articulation of civility and the exclusion of Otherness.

Recently, the notion of Otherness as a fundamental category of experience and reflection, and as an important perspective in the study of human thought, intercourse and culture, has been advanced in the human and social sciences. The question immediately poses itself whether this development occurred coincidentally in separate fields of study, or whether it spread from one field of inquiry to others. The Other has been placed on the agenda by pursuits as diverse as women's studies, literary image studies, psychology, philosophy and, most importantly perhaps, in the social sciences. The contributions to the present book intend to offer a survey of the issue as it is conceptualized in various fields

A majority of the following contributions are connected with the social sciences: those sciences which analyse the interaction between various subjects or cultures. Reflection on the nature of identity and alterity was made an especially pressing concern in anthropology, which has begun to study its own antecedents and ideological preassumptions in a critical self-analytical *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* and which is now grappling with the fact that it has traditionally defined its scientific *raison d'être* on the

embarrassing criterion: its object's non-European, non-elite's exotic Otherness — an Otherness which is now recognized as a byproduct of colonialism, exoticism and Eurocentrism. With the growth and recent revival of cultural relativism in anthropology, and with the rationality debate of the 1960s (which concerned the translatablity and commensurability of cultures[2]), anthropologists have come to query many tenets (which were once central to their scholarly tradition) as a problematic construct based on the marginalization and denigration of their Others — those who were external enough to Western elite culture to become the object of anthropological inquiry. The influential study *Time and the Other* by Johannes Fabian[3] has demonstrated the discursive and ideological presuppositions behind supposed scientific, neutral ethnography and came to challenge the entire epistemological basis of the anthropological endeavour. Such self-reflexive reassessments of presuppositions and methods paved the way towards a constructivist rather than positivist view of ethnography (as in the subtitle to Fabian's book), and brought anthropological practice to an increasing awareness of the problematic character of *ethnography*, in the sense of 'writing the Other's culture'.[4] This emphasis on writing as construction rather than representation helped to place such critical self-reflexion in a general interest, prevalent in a number of disciplines, in the poetics of the writing act and its implications for the communication and formation of theories and ideas. Thus Lemaire, in her contribution, can read an anthropological text with the help of critical tools developed in literary studies.

Indeed the insight is not restricted to anthropologists: that the differentiation between Self and Other is not a neutral category of

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[2]     Cf. M. Hollis & S. Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford 1985); S.J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge U.P., 1990).

[3]     *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object* (Columbia U.P., 1983).

[4]     The trend is exemplified also by the impact of Clifford Geertz. Cf. generally Geertz, *The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford 1988); J. Clifford & G.E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley 1986); iid., *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago/London 1986); J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography. Literature and Art* (Harvard U.P., 1988).

cognition open to all sentient individuals in like manner; that its distribution is fraught with ideological implications: this has been advanced by feminist scholars of different methodological persuasions (cf. Van der Kley and Lemaire), and by literary or social historians working on national or ethnic identity formations in cultural praxis (cf. Van Alphen, Leerssen, Nederveen Pieterse). Indeed there are signs that this awareness may be part of a general, paradigmatic shift of emphasis in scholarship generally — the early signs were noticeable, for example, in linguistics, when Saussure and Troubetzkoy began to locate the meaning of verbal or phonetic language elements in terms, not of a 'meaning' inherent in the individual sign's relation to its reference, but rather in a pattern of semantic differentiation, where the meaning of a word or sound was seen to lie, not in its *identification* with its real-world reference, but rather in its being distinct from all other words or sounds in the linguistic referential system. In like manner, some historians have developed a historiographical theory which is based on the notion of the past as *changes* and *discontinuities* rather than individual situations or events.[5] In a parallel development, the idea of the Other has been given a prominent position of the historiographical agenda.[6] Again, imagology, in comparative literary studies, resulted from a growing awareness that the cultural units between which 'international' literary traffic took place, were not so much pre-given eternal categories, self-sufficient and discrete national 'identities', but rather literary constructs in themselves, results of confrontation, projection and the articulation of cultural differentiation and discontinuity (cf. Leerssen's contribution). Similar patterns in the vexed relation between biological sexual difference and social gender construct have occupied feminist scholars; and in gay studies the very notions of identity and alterity (or homo- and hetero-ness) can be seen to interact in a curious combination of blatant social prejudice

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[5]    Thus Paul Veyne defines an historical event as an *événement différentiel*, i.e. an event which allows obne to see a difference between two subsequent situations. Veyne shows himself to be deeply indebted to Foucault (cf. *Comment on écrit l'histoire, suivi de Foucault révolutionne l'histoire*, Paris, 1979). Again, the work of Michel de Certeau addresses similar patterns of 'making differences'; cf. his *Heterologies: Discourse of the Other* (Manchester U.P., 1986).

[6]    Witness the topic for the 16th Congrès International des Sciences Historiques (Stuttgart 1985), which was on *L'image de l'Autre. Étrangers, Minoritaires, Marginaux*.

and intimate personal self-experience (cf. Hekma, below). Whether homosexuality is a mode of being or a mode of behaving; whether it is a fundamental category of sexual identity or an ideological construct resulting from specific historical needs and circumstances; such questions, paradigmatic perhaps for the study of alterity between essentialism and constructivism, pose themselves with special urgency in this field.

The central thinker, whose influence has become manifest in all the disciplines represented in this book, is Michel Foucault. His influence in the social sciences, again, is overwhelming; however, it may be of use to place his thought in its context and to trace it as part of a reaction against Hegel as the culmination of modern thought.

Most philosophers who within the present century have addressed the problematics of alterity and difference were grappling, in one way or another, with Hegel. Hegel's thought is still constructed along the lines of identity and of unifying, harmonizing identification: in a reflexive process, *Geist* gradually apprehends itself and reality as it gains insight into itself and the world. The resulting system is one of increasing expansion and incorporation, assimilating or at least harmonizing all otherness in terms of an expanding identity. Contrast, plurality and difference, in Hegelian thought, are moments in a movement towards reconciliation, unity and harmony.

Hegel's notion of a dialectical *Vermittlung* between Self and Other was abandoned by a number of later thinkers. They take to a philosophy of division, which may be more or less pessimistic: Bataille's distinction between profane homogeneity and sacred heterogeneity; or Sartre's social ontology in *L'être et le néant*; or René Girard's notion of the I's mimetic desire for an Other which is both a role model and an obstacle;[7] or Lyotard's notion of dissenting parties. Within the chorus of post-Hegelian reflection of Otherness, an important position is taken up by the great figure of Emmanuel Lévinas, whose thought is more hermeneutically inspired. For Levinas, the Other's autonomous presence is irreducible to, indeed prior to subjective identity; on that hermeneutically-inspired basis Lévinas comes to query the very idea of an identity-based ontology which

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[7] For the process by which the Other may be made to serve as scapegoat so as to restore social order by being expulsed, see Girard's *Le bouc émissaire* (Paris, 1982).

is operative even in Heidegger, and which is ethically questionable in its intolerant ego-centrism, its reluctance to acknowledge the fundamental irreducibility of the Other to the self. [8]

It is in this anti-Hegelian differential thought (which might be traced through Nietzsche and the impact of thinkers like Kojève and Bataille) that we should see Foucault's work. He replaces the Hegelian dialectic of *Aufhebung* by a sociohistorical mechanism of exclusion (as Karskens analyses in greater detail); he argues that the forceful exclusion and exorcism of what is Other is an act of identity formation, and elaborates on the historical case of the exclusion of unreason and madness as part of the self-definition of the rational humanistic ideal, which thereby suppresses and denies a part of the human personality. History, for Foucault, is still one of human self-constitution; but unlike the Hegelian process of recuperation and finding-towards-oneself, and the growth of an articulated identity, it is now described in terms of exclusion and estrangement, of the subordination of otherness by the hegemony of self. Thus madness is no longer negated in the Hegelian sense but socially segregated, outcast and obliterated. [9]

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[8]     *Totalité et infini* (The Hague, 1961); *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague, 1974). The importance of the Other in hermeneutical thought is manifest in Gadamer's critique (in *Wahrheit und Methode*) of what he considers Dilthey's naive *verstehen* of the other. Gadamer has had an important impact on the hermeneutical school in literary scholarship (Jauss, Iser) thematizing the relationship text-reader.

[9]     The name of Foucault, in literary studies and cultural criticism, is often seen as part of 'Post-structuralism' and bracketed with those of Barthes, Derrida and Lacan. Indeed Derrida's view are comparable to those of Foucault, though more radical: In Derrida's view, thought as such stands indited for being based on the principle of exclusion. As soon as the *logos* articulates itself it excludes nonsense and madness (cf. 'Cogito et histoire de la folie', in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris 1967, 51-97). For Derrida, thought itself is a form of hegemony, and totalitarian in its claims to understand, to comprehend, to force Otherness and Absence in terms of presence and understanding. Thus the Derridean notion of *différance* is not only the well-known version of semantic deferral, but also a radical recognition of the constant refusal, in logocentric thought, to acknowledge difference. *Différance*, in Derrida's thought, is a fundamental category, unthinkable, differentiation-generating, and irreducible to a fundamental or ultimate identity.

However, unlike Foucault, the work of Derrida is more directly related to

Foucault's influence has been very important in all those spheres where the interaction between 'culture' and 'society' has been studied, and the results of discursive identity-articulations or attitudes can be measured in their social repercussions. Edward Said's pioneering, influential and controversial analysis of the Orient as the product of a Western, hegemonic exoticism is an obvious example, which in turn has led to a whole new genre in critical Orientalism and post-colonial studies: witness the work of Rana Kabbani and Homi Bhabha; [10] a similar project has been started in the work of V.Y. Mudimbe, which studies the construction of Africa as a

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the insights of his precursor Saussure. The impact of Derrida's thought on literary studies (exemplified here in Schrover's contribution) should, furthermore, be seen as an attempt to counteract that part of Structuralist poetics which continued the aesthetic programme of the Russian Formalists. Formalist thought (Shklovski, Ejchenbaum, Propp) had spread to French academic circles partly through the mediation of East-European emigrés like Todorov, Kristeva and Greimas, and had been incorporated into the structuralist study of literature around the review *Tel Quel* and the work of men like Gérard Genette and Philippe Hamon. The Formalist programme was fundamentally, however, to establish the *identity* of literature, to formulate a theory of *literariness* and to pinpoint the differences between literary and 'normal' texts. As a result, Formalist-inspired analyses often tried to assess the individual achievement of the literary text, 'what made it tick', its artistic integrity. It was this tendency which was counteracted by Derrida's impact: 'deconstructionist' analyses began to look, not for the harmony and integrity in which the text manifested its artistry, but for the way in which a text showed its underlying tensions, its negated contradictions, the traces of its inescapable self-referentiality which it purported to transcend or else obliquely thematized.

Whereas Formalist-influenced mainstream Structuralism looked for the signature of the individual text, post-structuralism began to query this textual individuality. More important perhaps than Derrida's apodictic *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* was Julia Kristeva's elaboration of the notion of an *intertext*, which she defined as the textual-semantic equivalent of what the social sciences called *intersubjectivity*. In Kristeva's case, then, it was the notion of an individual subjectivity behind the text which came to be queried. Kristeva's problematization of subjectivity was partly adopted from Lacan (who did to Freud what Derrida did to Saussure), partly a result of her reflection on feminine identity, with which she exercised enormous influence in the field of women's studies (cf. Van der Kley, below); it eventually led to her more general reflections on human identity and the Other which she laid down in her *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*.

[10]    Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978); Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London, 1986); Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London, 1991).

non-European Otherness and object of exoticist projections.[11] The entire field of racial studies has been affected, though it generally remains oriented along neo-Marxist lines — that is to say, in a perspective which affords primacy to actual (material, economic) power relations and explains the hegemonic cultural *Überbau* from socioecomic basis rather than *vice versa*. In this respect, such postcolonial studies into the configuration of race and class follow the lines set out by men like Frantz Fanon and Antonio Gramsci; thus in the London Institute for Race Relations' review *Race and Class*, or in the work of Jan Nederveen Pieterse (cf. his contribution to the present volume). Others have also adopted Immanuel Wallerstein's view of world-ecomic developments in terms of a 'world system' (Etienne Balibar, André Gunder Frank).

Within Europe, Said's model has been applied to Ireland;[12] and Europe's relations with the New World have likewise been studied as an instance of the confrontation with Otherness. Peter Hulme and Tzvetan Todorov[13] are two cases in point; a more Derridean way of reading this confrontation is performed by Peter Mason, who brings anthropological *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* and Derrida-inspired literary analysis together in a deconstructive interpretation of ethnographical representations of the New World.[14] A similar encounter in a key work of modern fiction is analysed here in Els Schrover's contribution.

The impact has spread beyond this culture-geographical inventory of Eurocentrism. Anthropology has also begun to query its traditional way

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[11]     Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana U.P., 1988).

[12]     W.J. McCormack, 'The Question of Celticism' in his *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literature* (Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 219-238; David Cairns & Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland* (Manchester U.P., 1988); and the new international research project on 'Celticism' sponsored by the Royal Irish Academy and the European Science Foundation.

[13]     Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1979* (London, 1986). Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'Autre* (Paris 1988); Id., *Nous et les Autres* (Paris 1988).

[14]     E.g. his contribution in this book, and his *The Deconstruction of America: Representations of the Other* (London, 1990), which refuses to measure the European monologue on the New World in terms of its (imponderable) distortion of an extratextual extra-European reality.

of viewing the relation of humanity to its non-human natural environment. The circumscription of a civilized, ordered space from the wildness of nature has been charted by British symbolic anthropologists (following more general reflection by, for instance, Mircea Eliade and Gaston Bachelard), and their approach has been followed up by historians like Keith Thomas.[15] The further implication of this relationship has been addressed by Donna Haraway's analysis of ideological constructs in our study of primates and apes, and even in our perception of the natural world in general.[16] Recently, initiatives such as the 'African Apes Project' have been a significant illustration of the ongoing intensification of this trend: a 'Declaration on African Apes' is being prepared which challenges the automatism of traditional exclusion mechanisms by arguing to include African apes within the community of man's moral equals.[17]

The study of the Europan confrontation with Otherness on this global scale has been able to draw also on another important scholarly tradition in this field: that of feminism. Many publications register a continuum in the exclusion of 'naturals' be they in the guise of animals or of women (who are thus conflated in terms of their marginality vis-à-vis phallocentric values); a similar path is pursued by Barbara Noske.[18] Within the Western world, the exclusion of women from the formulation of cultural values has of course been a central topic in women's studies. Indeed the very personality of the female subject as an Other has become a central concern, frequently tackled with reference to Freudian or to Lacanian thought; as Van der Kley shows in her contribution to the present volume, the status of Freud[19] and of Lacan on either side of the Atlantic matches a certain divergence in the respective agenda's of women's

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[15]    *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1983).

[16]    Haraway, *Primate Visions. Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York/London, 1989).

[17]    By the Italian Paola Cavalieri and the Australian Peter Singer, who are editing a collection of essays around this topic, due to appear soon.

[18]    Noske, *Humans and Other Animals. Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology* (London, 1989).

[19]    The value of psychoanalysis as an analytical tool in the study of otherness is queried in Corbey's contribution, which argues that Freud's thought instantiates, rather than reflects on, traditional alterity constructs.

movements and feminist scholars in America and Europe. Within Europe (and especially in France, under the influence of Derrida, Lacan and Kristeva there, cf. note 9 above), ideas have been developed on *écriture féminine* and on the playful 'micrologies' with which women authors try to circumscribe an alternative, Other, specifically feminine sphere of experience.

So many manifestations of alterity — clearly Otherness has become a very prominent concern in contemporary thought. The traditional Western articulation of cultural identity has excluded so many Others who are now, each individually, posing a moral and epistemological problem to modern scholarship. Alongside anthropology, and in close conjunction with a revolutionized literary criticism, a branch of Cultural Studies has sprung up which addresses the most diverse manifestations of alterity. A scholar like Sander Gilman has addressed a whole series of stigmatized and scapegoated Others: blacks, the insane, the sick, women, homosexuals, Jews, and has demonstrated structural constants in the stereotypical imagination of all these disparate and heterogeneous groups, linked only in their common marginalization.[20] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have published a seminal study on how various domains (the slum, fairgrounds, the carnivalesque, certain bodily practices) were constructed as 'low' and 'disgusting': an alterity against which post-Renaissance bourgeois identity could silhouette itself.[21] The literary-cum-historical analysis of travel descriptions has burgeoned, and exoticism has become a leading focus of interest in the history of ideas.[22] The topical (indeed, almost trendy) nature of the subject transpires from the fact that many publications in this area consist of conference proceedings (indeed, the present volume is a

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[20]    Cf. *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays of the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston, 1982); and *Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Cornell U.P., 1985).

[21]    *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986). The study of 'popular culture' generally has gained mauch interest, and frequently invokes the antecedents of Peter Burke, or M.M. Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque. Witness the work of historians like Nathalie Zemon Davis, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Arthur Mitzman.

[22]    Witness *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, ed. G.S. Rousseau & R. Porter (Manchester 1990).

case in point) or accompany expositions. Among the former we should mention the collections *'Race', Writing and Difference* and *Europe and its Others*[23], among the latter there is Jan Nederveen Pieterse's *Wit over Zwart* or the exhibition catalogues of *Europa und der Orient, 'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art, Exotische Welten - Europäische Phantasien* and *Der geraubte Schatten.*[24]

Perhaps the profusion of 'other'-related themes is bewildering; what is more, the topic tends to cut across existing divisions between various disciplines in the human and social sciences and offers a *fil conducteur* in which, for example, ethnographical texts are read with the expertise of the literary critic, or literary texts are read with the expertise of the anthropologist. Psychology, sociology, iconography, Image Studies, Women's Studies, Gay Studies, disciplines old and new, defined along different criteria of competence or terrain, all meet in their common interest in the subject of Alterity. They bring different perspectives, different priorities and methodological presuppositions; at times their respective views on one and the same issue in human culture can be irreconcilable. It is uncalled for, at this point, and given the nature of the shared topic, to bring all these endeavours under a single heading. The following collection merely aims to present, in a wholly artificial (alphabetical) order, the scala of approaches in all its variety; the meeting which is thereby documented was, if nothing else, exciting, inspiring, and continues to give cause for further reflection.

The construction of Otherness can be detected at the root of much injustice and suffering; it is a topic which cannot be studied without eliciting a certain amount of ethical discomfort. However, it would be all too easy to see in this ethical discomfort an escape hatch, a point where the modern scholar can feel comfortably different from the objectionable discourse s/he studies. The temptation exists: to define one's methodological justification in terms of an ethical quality, to denounce and to expose.

However it seems that to do so makes for poor scholarship. The

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[23]     Ed. H.L. Gates (Chicago, 1986); originally special issues of *Critical Inquiry* (12 #1, 1985; 13 #1, 1986). and ed. F. Barker et. al.: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1984 (Colchester, 1984).

[24]     Amsterdam, 1990; Berlin, 1989; New York, 1984; Stuttgart, 1987; and München, 1989, respectively.

editors believe that ethical values may guide one in one's choice of topic — to study alterity bespeaks another set of concerns than to study the development of the sonnet in European symbolism — but that ethical considerations are doubtful guarantors of the methodic soundness of one's research. The aim of alterity studies cannot be merely to point the accusing finger. Our purpose is not to quixotically denounce the makings of intolerance, merely to expose them.

Indeed it would be questionable to see the very topic of alterity in primarily ethical terms, as something which contains an inherent moral danger-signal. Otherness, whatever the social implications it may have elicited, is a categorical fact of life, and as such ethically neutral. Otherness will not go away: we know the world by subdividing it in spheres that we do or do not identify with. We have values and express them in endorsing or rejecting parts of our experience — or in selecting the type of topic we feel is worth studying. We are all ineluctably implicated in the world of human experience and cannot transcend its patterns either to pass judgement on them or to define their limitations.

Similarly, the categorical pre-given fact that our subjective identity exists in a constant confrontation with a sphere outside its cognitive purview (as Voestermans also traces) seems to offer little reason why we should militate against that state of affairs. To do so would lead to solipsism (and the inability to define the status of our disbelief in the objective existence of the world) or to that epistemological nihilism which, in the wake of Derrida, sees the very notion of Self as a hegemonistic intrustion on the virgin shores of Otherness. Such a decentering of subjectivity often invokes an ethical rather than an epistemological cause; but the question 'whose ethics if not those of the subject, and how communicated?' must in this case remain unanswerable.

The unknowability of that otherness which yet, by lying contiguous to our cognitive purview, invites acquaintance; which cannot become known in its own terms and which, in the process of becoming known, changes the subject to which it becomes known: that relationship is fundamentally hermeneutic. It ceases to be an epistemological mousetrap or an invitation to guilt if we can deal with that relationship on the basis of respect for the separateness between the Other and oneself, and a willingness to let the Other change one.