

Culture, Identity, and Interdiscursivity

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Throughout the centuries human beings have devised images of themselves and others. They have embedded these images in stories, songs, and other forms of artistic expression, but although the nature of these images has varied according to the interests of those involved and to the contexts in which they are living, cultural differences have rarely been acknowledged as self-evident. On the contrary, people tend to reject differentness, and the definition of what is human often extends no further than the borders of one's own group, country, race, or sex—to the borders of one's own language, continent, and culture. The "barbarians" are always the others. Thus, the Greeks viewed Romans as "barbarians," and the Romans in turn did the same with the peoples whom they subjugated. Germans have denied the humanity of Jews, and Jews have disdained Palestinians.

Ironically, Europeans, who felt they were more civilized than Indians and Africans, did not realize that Western "barbarianism" had already become proverbial to these peoples. In China, the Wall served as a dividing line between culture and "barbarism." The philosopher Shao Yong (1011-1077) expressed this ethnocentric mentality quite clearly when he declared: "I am happy because I am a human being and not an animal, a man and not a woman, a Chinese and not a barbarian, and because I live in Loyang, the most beautiful city in the world" (quoted in Sinclair 20). The tendency to judge others as being inferior to those in one's own group is obviously widespread, for the truthfulness of world views is often less important in gaining acceptance for them than is the extent to which they serve prevailing interests. In fact, scientifically untenable ideas sometimes survive for surprising lengths of time (for an example of this phenomenon, see Schipper *Homo Caudatus*).

During the twentieth century, a Western multinational "Otherness" industry has developed, allowing a relatively small but powerful group to decide the fate, content, form, presence, and absence of its Others—to decide whether, where, and how these Others are supposed to exist, to be seen, or to be ignored. According to the stereotyped images generated in this way, the designated Others play different roles—either positive or negative—in advertisements, literatures, film, and the human sciences. Considerable scientific research has been devoted to the phenomenon of the Other during the past twenty years. The Other has been studied and classified in terms of appearance, gender, language, behavior, and customs. When the results of these investigations are presented, one is told that *this* is what "they" look like, that *this* is their reality, or that *this* is how our ancestors or learned predecessors characterized "them."

Yet such approaches to Otherness have become increasingly problematic. Scholars have become aware of the power factor that erects barriers between their own perspectives and an understanding of the Other as an object of research in (white, colonial, and/or male) culture and history. Because most of us in the Western world are descendants of slave-traders, colonialists, and gender-biased forefathers, we set about demonstrating how wrong our predecessors were and how different, how "politically correct" we ourselves have become; we rejected oppression on the grounds of race or gender, and we unequivocally repudiated the distasteful images that it had bequeathed to our societies. We reasoned that, "Our history is wrong, but I recognize its fallacies. See how much I detest those outmoded ideas. See how humbly I beg to be pardoned for the sins of those who came before me." Such manifestations of self-hatred are often accompanied by an uncritical acceptance of whatever the formerly oppressed Others did or said.

Yet the same power relations that existed in the colonial era continue to exist in the present. Have these revisions of the colonialist world view proved useless then? Images seem to lead lives of their own. The term "colonized" has come to be regarded as more or less synonymous with the term "third world," which translates into Western controlled underdevelopment and a third-rate status in the world (see Schipper *Homo Caudatus*). Extensive studies, collections, documentaries, and exhibitions revealed how the West's "primitives" had been constructed in the Western imagination, but all these efforts, ironically, did little more than draw increased attention to the Western perspective. Relatively little was said about the way in which Others imagined themselves and their Others.

The words "difference" and "otherness" have "by now acquired talismanic properties," as Edward Said has remarked, but he also concludes that, "there is an almost total absence of any reference to American imperial intervention as a factor affecting the theoretical discussion" (213 ff.) Despite the attention paid to the Other in scientific debates, the West's actual behavior toward Others continues to obscure the position from which these ideas are propagated and translated into action. In one's daily life, one's own context and mode of thinking tend to be experienced as self-evident and logical, whereas deviant views tend to be rejected as aberrations. Although alternative views of the world might be based on valid logical systems of their own, most people reject them *a priori*, paying exclusive attention to what is conveyed to them by means of their own sanctioned channels of information.

In *Hopes and Impediments*, Chinua Achebe emphasizes how much we cherish the information that we receive from our own "channels." As far as the "channels" of Others are concerned, we prefer those that have been disinfected, those that willingly become "purveyors of the old comforting myths." Achebe pleads for an equal exchange, but he recognizes the impediments that will block the way to the attainment of such a solution as long as the point of departure remains the assumption that only the representatives of a single group are qualified to interpret the world. Such an assumption prevents dialogue and perpetuates a situation in which the Other is an invented stereotype that is exploited to label Others and to justify their exclusion from a mutually beneficial partnership. As Achebe points out, the "real African" was created in this fashion:

This creature was invented to circumvent the credibility problem of the white man talking to himself. If the white man seems to say I must now listen to Negroes then I had better find those as yet unspoiled by Western knowledge, which unfortunately tends to put inconvenient words in their mouths. (18)

Unfortunately for this stereotyped image, the "unspoiled" creatures are rapidly dying out, and European views of Africans must be readjusted when such images are confronted by counter-images; similarly, the image of the "real" woman is necessarily modified when it encounters opposing perspectives. The struggle between image and counter-image is not an easy one, for, as Achebe points out, dominant groups experience great difficulty in extending equality to others (15).

Demand for alternative perspectives is not generally acute, and curiosity about the answers of others tends not to be particularly intense. Although Pliny once declared, "Ex Africa semper aliquid novi" [Always from Africa (comes) something new], little attention has been accorded to the source of this news. Who reported it and why? European expansionist views are quite different from those of its victims. One needs to reexamine the available source material and to determine the degree to which both perspectives are represented, the degree to which research results in history, sociology, anthropology, and literature have been skewed by differences in the amount of effort devoted to describing, studying, and teaching particular peoples. Such quantitative differences obviously affect their chances of being seen, heard, and (re-)presented. The same proviso holds true for research results on matters of gender.

Meanwhile Others no longer remain silent. They "challenge and resist settled...histories, forms, modes of thought" (Said 223). The challenge for us is to take their alternative perspectives seriously, to reformulate the question of cultural identity, and to articulate a global history that includes the story of the Other as told from the perspective of the Other:

If we no longer think of the relationship between cultures and their adherents as perfectly contiguous, totally synchronous, wholly correspondent, and if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between polities, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not at least. (Said 223)

Under these circumstances, some people have concluded that uncontaminated research is impossible and that we should no longer examine, describe, and interpret the products of societies to which we do not belong. In the past, it was often assumed that the problem could be solved by respecting a certain distance between researchers and the objects of their research, thereby assuring the objectivity of their observations. Today, however, even intersubjectivity is suspect because other subjects consulted for purposes of scientific control tend to come from the same culture, social background, nation, or continent as the researcher. What is to be done?

One way of approaching culture and culturally conditioned behavior might be to draw upon the concepts *emic* (from inside) and *etic* (from outside)—terms which Kenneth Pike defines as follows:

The etic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from outside of a particular system, and it is an essential initial approach to any alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system.... The etic organization of a world wide crosscultural scheme may be created by the analyst. The emic structure of a particular system must be discovered.... Two units are different etically when instrumental measurements can show them to be so. Units are different emically only when they elicit different responses from people acting from within the system. (37 ff.)

Pike places primary emphasis on the emic view, but he does not ultimately answer the question about whether or not intercultural comparative study is possible (cf. Rossi and O'Higgins 93 ff.).

The distinction between the "emic" and the "etic" thus needs to be supplemented by a better comprehension of people's self-understanding. As M. Brewster Smith has said:

How people construe themselves and how their constructions are culturally phrased should interest us not only because they are humanly interesting for their own sake, and scientifically interesting for their bearing on general personality theory, but also because, as reflexively conscious creatures, people are influenced by their self-conceptions. Their metaphors of selfhood become in part self-fulfilling prophecies. A fuller understanding of this process would seem to be high in priority as knowledge that potentially contributes to human liberation. (84)

In fact, a renewed interest in intercultural research is leading to a more extensive study of the theories people have about themselves, about the formulations they employ to express themselves in language, and about the metaphors that are commonly linked to their sociocultural and gender contexts.

Among others, the sociologist Peter Weinreich rightly distinguishes between emic, ego-recognized categorizations of the self as member of a group and etic definitions attributed by others to the self as member of a general category. In complex societies, as he points out, one must of course take into account the relations between the superordinate community and the various subordinate communities that comprise it, while recognizing that influential significant Others can make the social and cultural identities of dominated groups vulnerable. In the emic approach, one studies individual and group experiences that are communicated by the participants themselves. Literature provides a good example of this process: authors create characters on the basis of their own cultural and social experience, reflecting the norms and values that they themselves have internalized. If, in the past, people's reflections on themselves—their own (emic, ego-recognized) conceptualizations of identity—have not played a large enough role in the work of social scientists, literature might well offer them an important source of information about this dimension of their subject matter (see Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu). Indeed, a culture-centered emic approach based on the role of the subject could, for example, draw upon the patterns of cultural identity as expressed in fiction to provide a considerable amount of information.

If reality is a construction, as sociologists of knowledge such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann contend, literature is a secondary construction that is based on it. The concept of identity is clearly embedded in both of these constructions. In her study of psychological processes, Marisa Zavalloni defines collective identity as "a cultural product that embodies all that has been recorded as history, institution, fiction, work of art and knowledge. The sociocultural environment, of which collective identities are indeed an essential part, may be seen as the sedimented product of centuries of interactive cycles, molded through psychological processes that can be considered as fixed parameters which reproduce and sometimes subvert its order" (206). From this perspective, personal identity develops during a series of personal interactions with the sociocultural environment. Zavalloni herself formulated a method of "representational contextualization" to gather data about a person's identity in terms of his/her country, sex, religious background, vocation, social group, political commitment, peer group, and family situation.

Such data can be inventoried. Coded in language as "manifest thinking," "first-order data" enable us to evaluate the sociocultural environment, but it is only one aspect of what is activated in the brain when a person comments on the various

categories mentioned, for manifest thinking invariably coexists with "second-order data": the internalized images, collective memories, and traditions that are handed down from one generation to the next and that (as "background thinking" on the periphery of consciousness) constantly accompany our utterances, which are coded in language. The concomitance of words and background thinking constitutes what Zavalloni calls the "internal operant environment." As she explains, "The associations between a descriptive category of one's identity group and one's image and memories have been found to be stable over time and seem to operate in the brain as units of representational thinking, a mixture of words and thoughts" (208).

People are not necessarily conscious of the ways in which manifest thinking and background thinking function, but they can be made conscious of them. The pronoun shifters "I" and "We" play an important role in this process, for they link the members of the group to each other emotionally in their social intercourse. In interaction with each other, the identity associated with the "I" is repeatedly reinforced by reference to the "We." In fact, the complex interrelationship between background thinking and manifest thinking functions like a computer program that is continually searching for "compatible inputs," which are selected on the basis of recognized similarity and difference, sameness and otherness, positive qualities and negative ones, self and non-self. Such oppositions are fundamental to the construction of reality, for they imply that people who make a negative impression are inextricably linked to people who are experienced as positive, important, and legitimate.

In daily life as well as in literature and the sciences, individuals tend to be psychologically predisposed against groups regarded as being different from their own. The possibility of imagining one's self in another person's place is generally restricted to the category of people who belong to one's own group. For this reason, the reality of the out-group cannot be experienced internally. As Zavalloni explains, "Thinking about the being of these groups will give rise to an emptiness, a blank feeling" (208) insofar as it does not evoke prototypes of differentnesses that are rejected as non-compatible. Indeed, everything that does not have a fixed positive meaning in the internal operant environment tends to be registered as uninteresting, unimportant, or untrue. Culture plays a crucial role in shaping the internal operant environment, for the products of culture-creators, artists, philosophers, and researchers serve to reinforce individual motivations and arguments. According to Zavalloni, for example, structural similarities in the internal operant environments of culture-producers and culture-consumers correspond to the way human nature is depicted in art, literature, film, science, ideology, and other realms of cultural production in their society.

In considering the extent to which power and interest determine what belongs to the center and what belongs to the periphery, we can elucidate the relationship between a culture and its various sub-cultures by addressing Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). Although groups in any society invariably construe reality in ways that differ from those of other groups in that society, a separate sub-culture exists only when it exhibits a fixed pattern of specific differences from the larger cultural system of which it is a part and with which it shares common features. The terms "culture" and "sub-culture" are therefore always relative, for just as one might speak about European (or African) cultures, within which the cultures

of Great Britain (or Zimbabwe) would be sub-cultures, one could refer to the culture of Great Britain with its gay and Anglican sub-cultures, or the culture of Zimbabwe with its Shona and "Rhodie" sub-cultures.

Zavalloni's discussion of internal operant environment, manifest thinking, and background thinking enable us to gain valuable insight into the nature of cultural and sub-cultural identity. If one is programmed to conceive of culture as Western culture, other cultures will tend to be regarded as peripheral, negative, inferior, uninteresting, and/or unimportant. In this case, one's background thinking articulates the belief that there is no real culture outside the Western center, because Others have never produced a Rembrandt, a Bach, or a Beethoven. The literature of these Others is of course not considered to be part of the "mainstream." Such "background thinking" is perceived as the truth, as an accurate depiction of reality.

Identity mechanisms tend to be reinforced by the way we deal with information that is in harmony with our internal operant environment and with information that is not compatible with it. In principle, we are only open to compatible input. However, even information which is accurate and acceptable might not be accepted because the people who encounter it lack the receptivity to assimilate it, and if this information contradicts elements of their background thinking, they have no motivation to alter these elements. One's own culture and the information one receives thus constantly reinforce each other through the medium of the same identity mechanism; indeed, this reinforcement accords an aura of objectivity and "reality" to both of them.

Many examples could be cited from the field of literary studies to illustrate the resistance of scholars to the input of the Other. When Emmanuel Nwezeh criticized Albert Gérard's view of comparative literature as too European and therefore inapplicable to Africa, he also explained why he felt that some of Gérard's comments were "paternalistic" and "neo-colonial," but when Gérard was invited to comment on the matter, he expressed surprise at Nwezeh's polemical tone and declared that he himself was "an academic who has devoted twenty years to the study of African literature and does not intend to enter into a discussion about it" (41). In other words, he rejected new input from an Other because he regarded it as incompatible with his own professional standing in the field. The exclusion of the Other is also obvious in a comment made by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his study of the Bororo: "The entire village left the next day in thirty canoes," he declared and then added, "We remained behind with the women and children in the *abandoned* houses" (quoted in Michard and Ribery 7, emphasis added).

Although I have met few proponents of the unwritten law that one must be black to study literature written by black authors, the response to African criticisms of methods and techniques used by some white researchers has been the charge that these criticisms were introducing a normative point of view.

However, normative points of view existed long before the criticism of the dominant discourse was made; in fact, they were so profoundly embedded in people's background thinking that they were unaware of their own biases. For example, D. W. Fokkema has criticized the field of women's studies for its "anti-empirical subjectivist tendency," on the grounds that those conducting the research were themselves the subjects of that research. According to him, this situation introduced a normative standpoint into the academic discussion and excluded the possibility of an independent verification of research results. He added that "the unwritten law that women are the only ones who are qualified to engage in women's studies is similarly based upon an undesirable intermingling of subjective interest and research

procedure" (253). Yet he himself fails to consider how his own subjective interests prevent him from assimilating the input of the Other and how these interests enter into his own definition of empirical research.

Women speaking to women are no exception to this rule: they also recognize the perspective of the Other. For example, after a lecture by the Anglo-Indian critic Gayatri Spivak, the Nigerian woman scholar Folabo Soyinka Ajayi remarked that she "did not find deconstruction that relevant to the analysis of her work." In response, Spivak condescendingly declared, "There can be no learning when the field is not prepared.... When one says Africa, quite often...we forget that Africa is a place with universities and so on" (quoted in Jeyifo 5). Ajayi, who would have welcomed a "critical" dialogue on the subject, felt that she had been treated to an "insulting diatribe" instead; for our purposes, the most revealing aspect here was the restrictive use of the pronoun shifter "we." The term obviously did not include Ajayi, who could hardly be expected to forget that there were universities in Africa.

Such confrontations demonstrate the necessity of continually reexamining the premises upon which the academic community operates and the way in which statements are verified in it. To what extent have members of this community been programmed by their status, their gender, their culture? How have differences in (sub)culture, class, and gender been integrated into a hierarchic system of assumptions that govern the descriptive and analytical work of scholars in the field? How does power influence the result of research in literary studies? Dialogical theory from a critical and dialectical perspective seeks to foster a discussion among scholars from different positions within the existing hierarchy to explore the existence of common elements in their constructions of reality and to discuss the possibility of reaching agreement about the objects of their research. Only a greater awareness about our own cultural context can enable us to detect the ways in which input is repudiated as non-compatible within the context of our own background thinking. The confrontation between discourse and counter-discourse is particularly important in this regard.

The ideas of Peter Zima are relevant in understanding why this is so. He advocates replacing the individualistic term "inter-subjectivity" with the critical term "interdiscursivity," a concept that emphasizes the collective sociolectic nature of all theoretical discourses. Interdiscursivity and an awareness of historical—cultural relativity are indispensable for all of us who are engaged in the comparative study of literature, for we tend to be programmed to discount any counter-discourse in advance. The dominance of the system to which we belong represents a barrier that should not be underestimated. The assumptions that structure our background thinking cannot be simply discarded; nevertheless, if we hope to maintain our integrity as scholars, we must acknowledge and honestly examine the contents of the counter-discourse.

In *Literarische Aesthetik*, Zima elaborates on *interdiscursivity* in literary and social scientific study. In both areas, the objects of research are at the same time its subjects. Under such circumstances, description and explanation can only have a dialogical character, but what is the nature of this dialogue? Under what social and linguistic conditions is theoretical communication possible at all? Instead of inter-subjective dialogue, Zima insists that there should be intercollective or interdiscursive dialogue in which the collective nature of group languages is taken into consideration. Pleading for close co-operation between scholars of literature and scholars of the social sciences, he argues that literary study is a social science because its field is much wider than the literary text as such: it includes the whole literary

communication system as a market of publishing, reader groups, their ideologies, literary movements, criticism, literature in the media, etc. Since all texts, whether literary or theoretical, are affected by polysemy, the dialogic study of literature is not possible within the context of a single sociolect. Dialogue in the interdiscursive sense addresses the theme of the relations between sociolects, opening us to the possibility of calling our own perspectives into question. In this way, it becomes possible for us to overcome our own particularity through dialogic objectivation and detachment.

There is no neutral knowledge. In literary texts as well as in theoretical texts, there is always a narrator's perspective. Similarly, in any genuine dialogue, one is obliged to reflect seriously upon one's own discursive practice, thereby moving from an *intradiscursive* position to an *interdiscursive* one. Because all sociolects are marked by a certain narcissism that blinds its practitioners, trapping them in their own monologues, we can never reach the real "facts." In this context, all our constructions are *ficts* that can only be validated by interdiscursive consensus. As Ernst von Glaserfeld explains, we can only compare our own perception of an apple with other perceptions of the same apple, but never with the apple itself (cited in Zima *Literarische Aesthetik* 405 ff.). In other words, there is no unalloyed perception, no observation without interpretation. All observation and perception contains an implicit social factor that is mediated through discourse and sociolect. Genuine dialogue thus needs to take place on the interdiscursive level, not because intradiscursive dialogue is untrue, but because intradiscursive statements tend to perpetuate collective prejudices. Knowledge can be gained from dialogical mediation between heterogeneous discourses because dissensus intrudes into the monologue, calling into question the prejudices and dogmas that characterize each sociolect. In fact, genuine dialogues draw sustenance from dissensus, self-reflection, and the necessary self-irony of those who engage in it.

In describing the power mechanisms of critical discourse, Biodun Jeyifo explains that parallel or competing discourses can be incorporated in the dominant critical one, whereas others are neutralized, marginalized, and ignored:

...[W]here one discourse achieves relative dominance over other discourses, we are beyond the power of individual scholars, critics or theorists to serve as arbiters of opinion, knowledge, or value, no matter how gifted or influential they might be. What gives a particular critical discourse its decisive effectivity under these circumstances is the combination of historical, institutional, and ideological factors that make the discourse a "master" discourse which translated the avowed will-to-truth of all discourse into a consummated, if secret, will to power. In other words, this "master" discourse becomes the discourse of the "master," in its effects and consequences at least, if not in its conscious intentions. (34)

Our task as critical readers is then to identify the master's (male as well as female) voice, to recognize where "the will-to-truth masks the will-to-power which pervades all discourse" (34). How can we do this? How can we know if the master discourse is fooling us into accepting certain kinds of information simply because they are compatible with our background knowledge? How can we recognize other ways of knowing?

In seeking to respond to such questions, we always need to focus on the subject. We need to ask: *Who is speaking? Who is seeing? Who is acting?* But we also need to ask: *Who is not speaking? Who does not have the right to speak in the text? Who*

is not seeing? Whose perspective is not represented? Who does not act? Who is passive or powerless to act, to take the initiative? Who must submit to the acts of others? At the same time, we need to focus on the object of the three basic forms of activities: *What is the speaker saying? What kind of action is he or she performing? What does he or she consider worth including in the story? What is "naturally" omitted from it? What kinds of opinions are expressed and to what extent are they consistent with other (expressed or silenced) opinions? What are the characters doing? Are they acting individually or as a group? Are they acting in accord with each other or opposing each other's interests?* (see Bal; see also Schipper *Unheard Words*). Such questions, which make it possible for us to gain insight into the power effect of the discourse, are equally relevant to theory, literature, and the news as reported in the print media or on television. They are also relevant in our attempts to gain insight into texts about South-North or South-South relations as well as those that deal with gender, class, and race relations.

In the academic global village of our time, we dare not continue to confine ourselves to what is happening within the walls of our own home. Whether we like it or not, we confront an entire village square of literature. The intercultural aspect of literary communication in the broadest sense is becoming increasingly important. For this reason, genuine dialogue with researchers from different cultures is essential. Yet all those who specialize in the study of cultures or sub-cultures other than their own might do well to bear in mind the Mandinka proverb about the stranger: "No matter how long the tree trunk stays in the water, it will never become a crocodile." Nevertheless, one does not have to be a crocodile to swim in the water, just as one does not have to be a woman to engage in women's studies or a member of the culture that one happens to be studying. At the same time, it is salutary to remember that each of us is in turn crocodile and tree trunk, depending upon whether we are situating ourselves in relation to the Self or in relation to the Other. As Geneviève Boffème demonstrated in her magnificent study, *Le peuple par écrit*, it is also possible for crocodiles to transform themselves, at least partially, into tree trunks while studying their own group, class, gender, or culture. Distance from the object of one's study is not necessarily negative.

In fact, Mikhail Bakhtin underscores the way in which outsidership can be a most powerful factor in understanding:

A meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and oneness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. (7)

The reverse is of course also true, for interdiscursivity as a dialogical intercultural encounter is by its nature mutually enriching. The Fulbe express the same idea in somewhat different terms, but they are referring to the same phenomenon when they say: "One bangle never jingles."

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