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Canon and Corpus: an Alternative View of Comparative Literary Studies in Colonial Situations

1. It would be self-evident to say that the very configuration of comparative studies of literature[1] was an European invention, although comparative processes are a distinctive characteristic of living systems: human beings have established different rules for the comparative games according to their historical, social and political needs (Smith 1971). It follows, then, that to identify the kind of comparatism which emerged from and during the expansion of the Portuguese and Spanish Empires in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Winter 1976; Pagden 1982; Mason 1990: 13--41) is a move which would help us in understanding some of the peculiarities of comparative studies of literature today. The relevance of this historical moment to my discussion stems — on the one hand — from the transition of the three major languages of learning and scholarship (Greek, Latin and Hebrew) to the emergence of the vernacular and the constitution of the major Western national languages (Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, German, Italian) and — on the other — from the configuration of nation-states with their respective languages and literatures. There is no need here, in a journal addressed to a specialized audience, to go into the history of Comparative Literature, or to elaborate on the fact that the emergence of the discipline is an offspring of the history of national literatures. It would be helpful, nevertheless, to recall some statements defining the discipline in which the idiomatic and national foundations are implied. Clements (1978), for instance, in his discussion of the origins of comparative studies of literature in America, mentions that Latin, French and German were the first three major languages for the first generation of American comparatists. These three languages are one meaningful example of the unity of Western literature which helped in shaping the canon and thhe field of comparative studies:

> Western Literature forms a historical community of national literatures, which manifests itself in each of them. Each lyrical, epic, or dramatic text, no matter what its individual features, was drawn in part from common material, and in that way both confirms this community and perpetuates it. For the creator of works of literary art, literature form both the past and the present forms the main ideational and formal context within which he works. Leiterary movements and literary criticism also document this basic unity of Western Literature. It is by viewing objects of literary research — text, genres, movements, criticism, in their international perspectives that it contributes to the knowledge

of literature (Jan Brandt Corstious, *Introduction to the Study of Literature*, 1968; quoted in Clements 1978, 5-6).

But of course there are changes in history that impinge upon the relevance of languages and cultures, as new candidates enter the market and fight for their place in it. One of those candidates in recent years was Spanish, not so much Spain and its literature, but the literature of Spanish America. Clements dwells on the fact that Spanish is no longer studied as a «commercial» language, and in support of his statement, he quotes José Donoso's *Historia Personal del Boom*:

> José Donoso in his recent study *Historia personal del Boom*, makes it clear that Hispanoamerican writers are no longer influenced by American and French authors, but indeed are now being imitated all over the Western World... Because of the maturation of many Western literatures and because of a dissatisfaction with two — literature courses and theses, students must have contact with several literatures and as many languages as they have time to master (Clements 1978: 103).

The point I am trying to make by reviewing Clements' argument is that the foundation of comparative studies as a discipline rests on a concept of literature which is generally taken for granted and on the premise that it is a universal of cultures. If comparative studies of literature was founded on the Greco-Roman legacy and reharsed on the major European languages and literatures, the argument goes, then new emergent languages and literatures could join the «hall of fame», once they went through the historical evaluative process which allows them to become part of the canon and the field of literature, according to the classical Western tradition. The Spanish-American novel of the tuwntieth century is a good example of this process. Latin American writers managed to compete in quality and be recognized by the critics and publishing houses who follow the rules of the game based on cultural products which can be marketed and authors who can be celebrated. While I do not see anithing particularly wrong in this process, I fail tosee — at the same time — why succesful works of the present, canonical works of the part and the celebration of the authority behind such cultural products should constitute the entire field of (comparative) literary studies. I also fail to understand why Peninsular Spanish and Portuguese literatures of the Golden Age of having been produced before the configuration of the modern nations and the foundation of comparative studies of literature, have to remain on the margins of the major languages and canonical literature to be compared[2]. There is an evolutionary model implicit in Clements' observation according to which languages and literatures considered marginal from the point of view of the historical foundation of the disciplines had to strive for their point of arrival and for the honor of being considered a worthy object of comparative studies, once they fulfill the standards established by canonical works and authors. Thus, emergent literatures of today, such as Latin America, Mexican America, African, Afro-

American, etc. would be considered in as far as they fit the requirements of a discipline whose field of study has been shaped by linguistic aesthetic criteria and limited to alphabetic writing.

Aesthetic evaluation of literary works of art since the XVIIIth century has been a basic principle of literary studies which impinged in two of its main manifestations: the history and criticism of national literatures as well as in leterary theory and comparatie studies. Recently, this situation has been forcefully challenged by Godzich (1988), from whom I would like to quote two telling paragraphs. The first addresses the actual configuration of comparative literature as a discipline. The second introduces the distinction between «emerging literatures», on the one hand, which are perceived in the context of an evolutionary process and integrated within the field of study, and «emergent literatures», on the other, which challenge the actual configuration of literary studies and comparative literature as they resist being treated as «emerging literatures».

> 1) What we are dealing with here is a long-standing pretension and implicit assumption of Comparative Literature: despite the diversity and multifariousness of literary phenomena, it is possible to hold a unified discourse about them. This pretension is the heir to the old project of a general poetics which was clallenged and ultimately brought to a stand-still by the European turn to nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Comparaive Literature is the haven in which the idea of this projecto has been preserved. The challenge posed by the establishment of distinct French, German, and English literatures is nothing, however, in comparison with that which issues today from the emergence of all sorts of new literatures: in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Canada (with its two «national» literatures), Australia, as well as black literature in the United States, women's literature in the New World, and so on. The project of a general poetics could move in the general direction of the complementary study of ethnopoetics on one hand and of universal of literature on the other, incidentally recapturing Hherder's conceptioon of literary study, and thus could institutionalize the division of labor between Comparative Literature and the «national» literatures along lines often suggested in the debates during our period of theoretical development: theory in Comparative Literature and analysis and criticism in the «national» literatures.
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> 2) It is my claim that it is precisely this hegemonic and monumentalizing view of literature which is challenged by emergent literatures. «Emergent literatures» are not to be understood then as literatures that are in a state of development that is somehow inferior to that of fully developed, or «emerged» literatures — our own disciplinary version of underdevelopment» or «developing» literatures, if you wish, with attendant «Third-World» ideologies — but rather those literatures that cannot be readily understood within the hegemonic view of literature that has been dominant in our discipline. In this view, emergent literatures would

include writings by racial and ethnic minorities in countries such as the United States; literature by women in, let us say, Italy, France, or Australia; as well as much of the new writing from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, including the Caribbean (1988: 35).

My intertion here is to push this argument forward, and twist it into the direction of the Americas (South, North, Central and the Caribbean), not only as a locus where emergent literatures are produced, bus mainly where emergent comparing subjects go hand in hand with emergent literary practices. My claim is that a transfiguration of the field is being produced both by emergent literatures as well as by emergent *loci* of enunciation and, therefore, of comparing subjects[3]; and that such a transfiguration invites rethinking some basic assumptions, on which comparative study of literature rests'. Concerning the first part of my argument, the fundamental question is «What could a comparatist compare?»; concerning the second, the fundamental question is «Who is comparing what and from where?». I intend, furthermore, to critically examine two of the basic assumptions in comparative literary studies: that literature is a universal of culture which can be assimilated to the Western literary standards and that the comparing subject is an epistemologically neutral subject, who practices comparatism detached from historical circumstances such as ethnic, gender and national configurations (Mignolo 1990a; 1991)[4].

These considerations were prompted when I began to inquire into the lack of comparative literature tradition in Latin America[5] and when I began to speculate about the differences between practicing literary comparatism from a European, North American, African or Latin American perspective. These speculations about the locus of enunciation were further developed when I reflected on my own experience of teaching Latin American and Comparative Literature in American universities, while being myself an Argentinean who pursued doctoral studies in France. It soon became obvious to me that one of the reasons for the lack of comparative studies of literature in Latin America, was that, according to the criteria established by the spread of cultural literacy in colonized countries, there was not (until the «boom» that caught Clement's attention), a literature worthy of being considered[6]. There were certainly interesting examples from the point of view of national literatures, but they did not fulfill the requirements necessary to be part of a more demanding field of study. This situation seemed to me to be as absurd as if a society would have to fulfill a set of requirements for social organization before being part of the field of sociology. Since I consider comparatism a fundamental method in the social and human sciences and particularly apt to account tor the complexities of multilingual and pluricultural areas such as the Americas, Asia or Africa, I have to conclude that for comparatism to be fruitful it cannot deal exclusively with literature (in the sense of the unity of Western literature which presupposed alphabetic writing and regional aesthetic criteria), but it must also be concerned with oral and non-alphabetic written texts. In colonial situations such as the New World during the

XVIth century, a description of literature and of the field of study which presupposes alphabetic writing and the letter won't do the job since there is no room for manouvre and for accounting for alternative writing systems such as the hieroglyphs developed in ancient Yucatan or the weaving-writing known as *quipus* in ancient and colonial Peru. Neither it allows room for considering the entire picture of social roles (*scribe, tlaculio, quipucamayoc*, see section 2.33.) and functions of writing within particular social organizations; nor for studying «reading» and reception in non-alphabetic writing systems. Briefly, the literary (written) work of art, the author and a literate audience is obviously a restricted model of the field and highly inadequate to deal with semiotic practices in colonial situations.

I anticipate that the reader would begin to wonder what all this has to do with comparative studies of literature. If that is the case, I must insist that my observations are methodologically cast in a comparative context and, historically, in a colonial context which invites an alternative view of the field of study as well as of the mode of understanding. Consequently, instead of departing from an assumed concept of literature and employ canonical examples supporting it, I would like to depart from the realm of speech and the diversity of writing systems in which complex human expressions are framed and in which the conditions for the very existence of semiotic interactions are established. I would like, briefly, to think of a field of study as a corpus of semiotic interactions rather than as a canon of literary works and to see the latter not as an alternative but as a sub-class of the former. The canon, in other words, is a part of the corpus not its antitheses (Mignolo 1990a; 1991b). Therefore, my argument is not intended to replace the canon with the corpus, neither to question the validity of having within the field of study canonical Western literary works as literary and comparative studies have had until now. I simply wish to address the need to compare «literary» experiences in colonial areas and to relativize the assumed universality of the comparing subject[7]. That is to say, while comparing «literary» experiences in colonial situations could be done without questioning the universality of the understanding subject, I will argue that it should also be done from the regional and historical perspective from which a comparative understanding takes place. I will submit first, that the literary canon which constitutes the field of literary and comparative studies is a regional cultural production within the universal corpus of semiotic practices; second, that colonial situations are paradigmatic examples of the differences between the literary canon within a semiotic corpus and, third, that understanding semiotic interactions in colonial situations requires a diatopic (or pluritopic) positioning of the understanding subject (Panikkar 1988; Mignolo 1991b; 1989b).

2. «Literature», in the West, has always been conceived in the context of alphabetic writing. Homer as the first epic poet and Aristotle as the first theoretician of poetry bear witness to this fact (Havelock 1963). The oxymoronic expression «oral literature» is, of course, a later invention. Once the concept of literature had been

forged and consolidated under the experience of alphabetic writing from the European Renassiance to European Enlightenment, similarities in the differences were not difficult to find (Viala 1985). Thus, the very foundation of the notion of «literature» in the eighteen-century replacing the notion of «poetry» needs to be revisited from the point of view of speech and writing, on the one hand, and orality and literacy, on the other (Mignolo 1991a). Speech and writing have this important difference: while every child under normal biological and social circumstances learns to speak, not very child learns to write. As a matter of fact, there are entire communities in which writing is either unknown or which have been deprived of it. In the West at least, speech has been used as a feature to distinguish human beings from other animals while writing has guaranteed the distinction between civilized human beings from barbarians or illiterates (Mignolo forthcoming; Sider 1987). The emphasis that in the West was placed on literature and the ideology of the alphabet obscured the fact that literature and alphabetic writing were limited to a minor number of languages, all of them related to the political and administrative power used by a minority to control a vast majority of people, most of them speaking languages for which no writing system had been developed. Harris (1986: 14-15) has made some observations which are relevant to the issue under discussion.

> Of the thousands of languages spoken at different periods in different parts of the globe, fewer than one in ten have ever developed an indigenous written form. Of these, the number to have produced a significant body of literature barely exceeds one hundred. But it is not only its comparative rarity as a cultural achievement which makes of writing something impressive and awe-inspiring. The Cherokee phrase «talking leaves» expresses more brilliantly than many scholarly monographs the seemingly miraculous element in writing. Leaves of paper have no voice and yet they can be made to speak. But the miracle by which this is accomplished is conceptually difficult to grasp in all its complexity and, paradoxically, all the more so for people who take reading and writing for granted as part of the normal course of education. Literacy scorns the 'base degrees by which it did ascend'; it leaves little room for the mystery of writing, which finds its apt expression in the name early given to the symbols of the old Teutonic alphabet. They are called 'runes' and etymologically the term means 'secret' (Harris 1986: 14-15).

In the linguistic map showed in Fig. 1 we we can see, for instance, that six major languages account for 45% and twelve major languages for 60% of the population of the earth. Six of these twelve major languages are spoken in a small corner of the extreme Western part of the world where each country has less than ten different languages and where the literacy ratio is less than 40% (Coulmas 1984). It is precisely in this part of the globe and within these six major languages that the concept of literature and the practice of literary and comparative studies were founded. In the Americas there are hundreds of «minor» languages obscured by the supremacy of the

«major» ones (Spanish, Portuguese, French and English). Paradoxically, each of them did not have the «allure» of the same language had in its place of origin (e.g.: Canadian French and Jamaican English are not the same as the French spoken in France, or the English spoken in Great Britain). As a consequence, the literature of the colonial societies was considered less relevant than the one in the metropolitan centers. And this evaluation impinged on the intellectual's ability to develop literary and comparative studies in the colonies which would compete with the prestigious grammatical, rhetorical and philological legacy, or with the equally prestigious (although in different headquarters) racing of modern (or post-modern for that matter) literary theory (Christian 1987). Thus, in each of the colonies founded by the major European powers since the end of the fifteenth century (in Africa, Asia and Latin America), a clash of languages characterized their cultural realities. Colonial situations (from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries) offered the opportunity to think in a new configuration of the field of study to those who are interested not only in comparing canonical authors (Borges with Becket or Donoso with Kundera) but also in comparing semiotic practices in colonial situations.

3. Three basic directions for comparative research and teaching were identified several years ago in and from Latin America by Pizarro (1982). These directions coincide with more recent comparative perspectives raised by the literatures of the English colonies (Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989; Dev and Kumar Das 1989), African literature (Gerard 1990) and the literatures of the Americas (Laguardias 1986; Pérez Firmat 1990; Spillers 1991). I will depart from the suggestions made by Pizzaro (1982) for developing comparative studies in and from Latin America, and will extend them to explore the possibilities of comparative literacy and literary studies in the Americas (South, North, Central and the Caribbean) with a focus on colonial situations. Pizarro (1982) has suggested three directions:

1) Comparative studies in plurilingual and multicultural nation-states such as Peru, Mexico and Guatemala, from the sixteenth century to the present;

2) Comparative studies between national literatures in different languages (Spanish, Portuguese, English and French in the Caribbean), mainly during the nineteenth century;

3) Comparative studies between Latin American and Caribbean literature, on the one hand, and European (Spanish, Portuguese, French) and American (U.S.) literature, on the other, from the sixteenth century to the present.

I would like to provide a few specificc examples to each of this directions in order to give a more defined profile to my general observations in the previous paragraph.

3.1. The first aims to illustrate the plurilingual and multicultural character of several areas in Latin America in which comparative (literacy and literature) studies

can be fruitful not only between two or more countries, but within one «nation». Let's take the case of Guatemala and one of its most representative (and Nobel Prize winning) authors, Miguel Angel Asturias. Understanding his well known novel *Hombres de Maiz* (*Men of Maiz*, 1948) presupposes, at least, two well defined discursive configurations. One is the tradition of European literature and the aesthetical norms of surrealism, which Asturias absorbed in France during the 20's and 30's. The other is the complex Mesoamerican tradition that, paradoxically enough, Asturias discovered in Paris, in *Le Musee de l'Homme*. Although Asturias' work could be read and understood in the discursive context of the novel as a genre, and of surrealism as a literary movement, it gains a whole new dimension when it is read in the context of Mesoamericann narratives such as the *Popol Vuh* (a council book of the ancient Maya-Quiche from the Yucatan Peninsula, currently known as Guatemala), as well as of Nahuatl rhythmic oral expression called *cuicatl* (song) by the ancient Mexica and translated by European missionaries as poetry. While the novel was written in Spanish, the *Popol Vuh* initially consisted of oral narratives, some of them inscribed in or related to Mayan hieroglyphic writing. Secondly, is was recorded in alphabetic writing by the Maya-Quiche themselves, toward 1559. The book was hidden from the Spaniards who «discovered» it at the beginning of the eighteenth century and translated in into Spanish. I do not think that in this case an intertextual study would solve the problem, since we are not only facing different languages, but different writing systems and non-related cultural traditions which came together during the conflictive encounter of the Spanish with the inhabitants of the Yucatan Peninsula. Because of the oral tradition and different writing systems of the Maya area, we are also facing different discursive types and conceptualizations of discursive genres. If the *Popol Vuh* had been printed in Spanish and declared a «national monument» (as it was in 1973 by the National Secretary of Education in Guatemala), we should recognize that history itself did not transform a cultural product of resistance into a monument of national glory, but that this was one of the several expected moves in the appropriation of Amerindian cultures by the ideologues of cultural nationalism (Urban and Sherzer 1991). Comparative studies os semiotic practices in colonial situations would contribute to the deconstruction of both the eurocentric conception of the field of study as well as its enforcement by dependent national cultures striving to maintain an internal colonialism.

But that is not all. When we bring *I, Rigoberta Menchú... An Indian Woman from Guatemala* (1982) into the picture, we soon realize that several chapters of the book are headed by an epigraph from the *Popol Vuh* and that several of the situations described by Rigoberta Menchú, herself a Maya-Quiche, bear a striking resemblance to some of the situations described in the *Popol Vuh*. Rigoberta told her story orally to Burgos Debray (a Venezuelan anthropologist) who edited (and obviously inserted the quotations from the *Popul Vuh*) and published it as one of the growing number of testimonial narratives. Since Rigoberta was illiterate in her own language, and she learned to speak, read and write Spanish when she was almost twenty years old, it was

impossible for her to have read the *Popol Vuh* in Maya-Quiche, and doubtful that she would have taken time to read a Spanish translation of what has been considered a «national» masterpiece or monument.

Certainly, Menchú's narrative has elicited heated discussion about its «literary» properties and the right to include it in the literary curriculum (Mignolo 1991), which is a telling example of the need to challenge the eurocentric concept of literature which prompted the discussion. One would be tempted to say that Menchú's narrative is not literature and that there is no need for it to be; and that only in discipline governed by a field of canonical works would this issue be relevant. Why should anyone be interested in praising the book only if there are convincing arguments to consider it literature? Conversely, why would anyone want to exclude it from the field if there is no argument to make it a «literary» example? I am suggesting that examples such as Rigoberta Menchú's narrative be read in a comparative context and as a social action which allows the comparatist to challenge the colonialist notion of literature which blocks the view of rich and complex semiotic practices in colonial situations. Comparing the *Popol Vuh*, with *L. Rigoberta Menchú* and *Men of Maiz* shows that a «national» literature of a colonized country (in this case Guatemala) opens unexpected perspectives to comparative studies of colonial semiotic practices.

Miguel Angel Asturias' *Men of Maiz* (<1948>, 1975) could be read as a Latin American version of European surrealism, marketed under the name of «magical or marvelous realism». This reading would require a familiarity with both European surrealism and the history of Latin American culture and literature. There is certainly no need to read the *Popol Vuh*, either before or after reading *Men of Maiz*. Once this step is taken, the reader would have a wider perspective on the novel and could even talk about influence or intertextuality, and thus interpret Asturias' novel within a theoretical framework derived from the experience and configuration of European literatures. It has been done and it probably will continue to be done in the future, since the challenge prompted by emergent literatures to the comparative field does not imply that an immediate paradigmatic shift will take place. From the point of view of emergent literatures, *Men of Maiz* provides a telling example of the fractured experiences of colonial semiosis: *Men of Maiz* is a hybrid product in which the literary values imparted by the spread of literacy in the colonies coexist with Amerindian cultural traditions preserved in the written version of the *Popol Vuh* and in the oral traditions recounted by Rigoberta Menchú. A comparative perspective on these three narrative would have to account for acts of resistance and opposition, outside the domains of «comparing literatures across-national boundaries», as the classical dictum based on the European literary experience make us believe. These three examples cohexist in the Guatemala of today, although one of them (the *Popol Vuh*) was produced under the Spanish rules, when Guatemala as a nation did not exist yet. A second example *(Rigoberta Menchú)*, does not represent necessarily Guatemalan national literature as the book remains on the margins of the official literary culture. The oral and ideographic tradition of the *Popol Vuh* translated by the Maya people

themselves into alphabetic writing (toward the middle of the sixteenth century) is a case of resistance to European literature and the ideological value of the *letter. I, Rigoberta Menchú* brings to the fore the interactions between oral traditions and «minor languages» (Maya-Quiche) which cannot be easily integrated to the field of comparative literature, when the field is shaped by three main criteria: first, the classical and modern major vernacular languages; second, alphabetically written texts; and third, texts recognized by their aesthetic values. Finally, *Men of Maiz* read in this comparative intra-national context contributes to an understanding that the spectrum of «literary» practices in colonial situations can hardly be reduced to the *canon of literary texts* and that decolonizing literary and comparative studies implies an openness to the configuration of *corpuses of semiotic interactions* (Mignolo 1990a).

3.2. The second example comes from the comparison between two female writers: a Jamaican, Michelle Cliff (Cliff 1985), and a Mexican-American, Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa 1987).

Cliff brought to the foreground the differences between the metropolitan and the colonial English of the West Indies, not of course in matters of accents or lexicon, but in its political dimension. Born and raised by a wealthy family, Cliff pursued her graduate studies in London, at the Warburg Instituute. Her dissertation on game-playing in Italian Renaissance took her to Siena, Florence and Urbino, a journey which ended in her participation in the feminist movement and in the discovery of an identity she learned to despise. In this case I will let Cliff speak for herself by quoting extensively from the «Preface» to *The Land of Look Behind* (1985):

> I originated in the Caribbean, specifically on the island of Jamaica, and although I have lived in the United States and in England, I travel as a Jamaican. It is Jamaica that forms my writing for the most part, and which has formed for the most part, myself. Even though I often feel what Derek Walcott expresses in his poem «The Schooner Flight»: «I had no nation now but the imagination.» It is a complicated business.
>
> Jamaica is a place halfway between Africa and England, to put it simply, although historically one culture (guess which one) has been esteemed and the other denigrated (both are understatements) — at least among those who control the cultura and politics of the island — the Afro-Saxons. As a child among these people, indeed of these people, as one of them, I received the message of anglocentrism, of white supremacy, and I internalized it. As a writer, as a human being, I have had to accep that reality and deal with its effect on me, as well as finding what has been lost to me from the darker side, and what may be hidden, to be dredged from memory and dream. And it is there to be dredged. As my writing delved longer and deeper into this part of myself, I began to dream and imagine <...>.

> One of the effects of assimilation, indoctrination, passing into the anglocentrism of the British West Indian culture is that you believe absolutely in the hegemony of the King's English and in the form in which it is meant to be expressed. Or else your writing is not literature; it is folklore, and folklore can never be art. Read some poetry by West Indian writers — some, not all — and you will see what I mean. You have to dissect stanza after extraordinarily Anglican stanza for Afro-caribbean truth; you may never find the latter. But this has been our education. The Anglican ideal — Milton, Wordsworth, Keats — was held before us with an assurance that we were unable, and would never be enabled, to compose a work of similar correctness. No reggae spoken here (pp. 12-13).

Cliff makes it clear that colonial literature will always lose the game when confronted with the practice as defined and exemplified by literary canon of the metropolitan centers. The same language, the same syntactical rules, but the game played under different conditions (metropolitan center vs. colonial periphery) results in different kinds of verbal practices: folklore is not literature, although the concept of folklore was invented by those who defined the concept of literature and used «folklore» as its otherness, just as myth was invented by those who needed to define the conccept of history. Both are good examples of the universalization of Western culture which impinged on the notion and practice of comparative studies of literature. Myth and folklore (in their verbal expressions) are generally perceived as oral traditions and usually in a «degraded» form of the official (and major) language or in a marginal or minor «dialect». Thus, the very concept of literature presupposes a major or official language of a nation and the transmission of the cultural literacy built into it[8]. The literary game which comparatist took as their field of study has always been a game within the boundaries of major languages (generally in their «correct» version), outside the conflicts between the metropolitan centers and the peripheral colonies. When a writer from one of the peripheral colonies manages to cross the cultural and political boundaries and assimilates him or herself into the game as it is played in the metropolitan centers, the comparatist scholar is ready and willing to welcome him or her into the universal house of literary art. Such is the case, for instance, os Clements' recognition of Donoso's literature or the international acclaim received by J. L. Borges. When looking at comparative studies of literature from the colonial, post-colonial or Third World perspective the preceeding one is not a very encouraging picture: third world writers are integrated within a field of study in which the rules of the game for reading and understanding literature in a comparative context are still dictated from the center[9]. Cliff's quotation could be taken as a call of alert not only to writers but to literary critics and comparatists concerned with the decolonization of knowledge and understanding in colonial situations as well (Nguge wa Thiong'o 1986; Rama 1982). (I will come back to this issue in section 3.)

To read Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La frontera* (Anzaldúa 1985) is to read three language and three literatures at the same time and in the same book. The book is basically trilingual, Spanish, English and Nahuatl and, of course, tricultural. Chapter 6, for example, is entitled «*Tlilli, Tlapalli:* The path of the red and black ink.» The explanation is provided in the same chapter:

> For the ancient Aztecs, *tlilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus codices* (the black and red ink painted on codices) were the colors symbolizing *escritura y sabiduria* (writing and wisdom) <...> An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness <...>
>
> I write the myth in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. The word, the image and the feeling have a palatable energy, a kind of power. *Con imagenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro. Con palabras me hago pieddra, pajaron, puente de serpientes arrastrando a ras del suelo todo lo que soy, todo lo que algún día seré.*
>
> los que estan mirando (leyendo),
> los que cuentan (o refieren lo que leen).
> Los que vuelven ruidosamente las hojas de los códices
> Los que tienen en su poder
> la tinta negra y roja (la sabiduría)
> y lo pintado,
> ellos nos llevan, nos guían,
> nos dicen el camino

The quotation shows the juxtaposition of Spanish and English. The quotation in verse form, given in Spanish in Anzaldúa's book, occurs in the *Colloquios y Doctrina Christiana*, a dialogue between the first twelve Franciscan friars arriving in Mexico in 1524, after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which was recorded in Nahuatl and collected and translated by Bernardino de Sahagún into Spanish toward 1565. Originally, then, the quotation in verse was in Nahuatl and reported the answers of the Mexica noblemen to the Franciscan presentation and requests that they adapt the Christian Doctrine. The excerpt quoted by Anzaldúa narrates the moment in which the Mexica noblemen refer to the *tlamatinime* (the wise men, those who can read the black and red ink, or what is written in the codices). Anzaldúa is not only mixing three languages (two of them with a strong «literary» tradition, Spanish and English, and the third, Nahuatl, which was and is still mainly oral), but also invoking two kinds of writing: the alphabetic writing of the metropolitan center and the pictographic writing of pre-Columbian Mexica (as well as Mesoamerican) civilization (s). What should comparatists compare is a question which emerges with particular force out of these examples.

Anzaldúa's example (as well as any Latino [Cuban, Puerto Rican and Mexican]) in the United States challenges not only the concept of national literature but also the very concept of literature itself and reveals new areas in which comparative studies between North and South Americas could be developed (Aparicio 1991). By bringing three languages, two writing systems and the encounter of oral and written traditions, Anzaldúa's text is an invitation to go beyond the narrow boundaries of the *letter* (*littera*, as in *littera*-ture) and of the nation. The comparative field is exposed in a single text which stands at the crossroad between Mesoamerican traditions, Mexican national identity and English, the official language of the United States.

Cliff's observation about the cultural, ideological and literary dimensions of the same language (English) directly addresses an issue which has been strongly and frequently voiced by West Indians (Lamming, Braitwhite) as well as French Caribbean writers (Glissant, Cesaire, Fanon): the need to explore comparatively verbal (oral and written) practices in the same language under colonial situations. Indirectly, Cliff addresses the issue of national literatures ans national languages since English is the language of the West Indies as well as the USA, which has vis-a-vis the metropolitan centers a relation similar to the one Brazil has with Portugal, Hispanic American countries with Spain and French Canada with France. Thus, comparative (literacy and literary) studies in the Americas will have as one of its fundamental components the diversity of colonial situations and colonial experiences. In turn, Anzaldúa offers a more revealing example of the point I am trying to make. Her book, written in three languages and referring to three different «literary» contexts, is a mixture of well known genres (essay, novel, poetry) and lesser known ones (*xochitl-cuicatl*, poetry; *huehuetlatolli*, discourse of Mexica wisdom; and *the red and black ink*, written genres). It is also — like the unorthodox genres mixture in which *The Land of Look Behind* is written — a critical perspective on canonical literature. Although oppositional practices based on the dislocation of traditional genres have been performed before, what distinguishes Anzaldúa's and Cliff's books from previous, similar examples is the consciousness of their marginality and the colonial situations which, as a woman from Jamaica and a woman from a Chicano community, they have been experiencing.

3.3. I would like, in my third example, to move beyond the realm of the letter and of literature. The notion of colonial semiosis will be introduced with the intent of redefining comparative literary studies by framing the field of comparative studies of semiotice practices in colonial situations.

The notion of «colonial discourse» enriched the vocabulary of colonial literary studies and offered, in my perception, an alternative distribution of the field of study which was dominated by the notion of «colonial literature». «Colonial discourse» according to Hulme's definition (Hulme 1987), comprehends all kinds of discursive production related to and produced in colonial situations, from the Capitulations of 1492 to *The Tempest*, from Royal Orders and edicts to the most carefully written

prose. The advantages of «colonial discourse» over «colonial literature» seemed to me enormous. It made possible, on the one hand, the expansion of the criteria under which the colonial literary canon has been established. But, more important, it also made possible the relativization of the concept of «literature» which, especially in colonial situations, is highly problematic. «Colonial literature» defines a canon which depends on discursive criteria established in the metroplitann centers and, therefore, is doubly problematic. First, because the «literary» production in the colonies and in the language of the colonized cultures is, more often than not, a poor «runner-up» to the literary productions of the colonizing cultures. And second, because «literature» is hardly a felicitous term to be applied to Amerindian discursive productions (mainly oral) and written interactions (mainly picto-ideographic and hieroglyphic, not to mention the *quipus*, which call for a particular analysis). The introduction of the alphabet in some sectors of the Amerindian population during the sixteenth century did not change the picture drastically. Whatever was fixed in alphabetic writing (such as the *Popol Vuh*, the *Chilam Balam* and many other examples) by member of a population who, toward the middle of the sixteenth century, were being forced to change their writing habits, or by Spaniards interested in understanding Amerindian cultures (such as the *huehuetlattolli* in Colonial Mexico or the *Huarochiri* in Colonial Peru), did not transform oral narrative into literature. The denial of «literary» qualities to Amerindian discursive production is not a negative value judgement, nor is it a suggestion of their cultural inferiority. It is just the recognition that literature is a regional and culture-dependent conceptualization of a given kind of discursive practice and not a universal of culture. It is also an invitation to ask about the nature and function of discursive practices in their «original» environment.

When pushed to the limit, however, the notion of «colonial discourse», desirable and welcome as it is, is not the most comprehensive notion we can concoct in order to apprehend the diversity of semiotic interactions in colonial situations. Hulme made it clear that in the area in which he conducted his study, the main documentation was of European origin. If we have in mind, instead, the entity that in the sixteenth century was called the New World, mainly by non-Castilian Europeans, and the West Indies by the Spaniards who were involved in the process of exploration and colonization, we have to account for a large domain of semiotic interactions beyond alphabetic written documents in European languages. The notion of «discourse», although embodying both oral and written expressions, may not be the best alternative to account for semiotic interactions between different writing systems as well. The Latin alphabet introduced by the Spaniards, the picto-ideographic and hieroglyphic writing systems of Mesoamerican cultures, and the *quipus* in the Andes each delineate particular systems of interactions which took place during the colonial period. If we were to limit the use of the term discourse to refer to oral and reserve the notion of text for written interactions, we would need to expand the latter term beyond the range of alphabetical written documents, in order to embrace all material sign inscriptions. By doing so we will honor the etymological meaning of text («weaving»,

«textile») reintroduced into language theory by Bhüler (1934) (Mignolo 1978: 104; Lotman 1972), and justify the insertion of the *quipus* into a system in which writing was always understood as scratching or painting on solid surfaces, but not as weaving (Cummings 1991). Two metaphors come to mind: the Latin similarities between «writing» and «plowing», on the one hand, and the modern similarities between «text» and «textile». As an activity, writing has been conceived and compared with «plowing»; as a product, the «text» has been conceived and compared with the intricacies of «textile».

Since, in the field of comparative colonial studies, we must account for a complex system of semiotic interactions embodied in the discursive (oral) and the textual (material inscriptions in different writing systems), we need a concept such as «colonial semiosis» which has the advantage of taking us away from the tyranny of the alphabet-oriented notions of text and discourse, as well as the disadvantage of adding to an already large and sometimes confusing vocabulary. On the positive side, «colonial semiosis» defines a field of study in a parallel and complementary fashion to such pre-existing terms as «colonial history», «colonial art», «colonial economy», etc. Briefly, the notion of «colonial semiosis» reveals that language-centered colonial studies (at least Latin American and Caribbean colonial studies) are moving beyond the realm of the written word in order to incorporate the oral and non-alphabetic writing systems as well as non-verbal graphic systems.

We are familiar, in the West, with the icons of Medieval scribes as well as with the tools and the settings in which writing took place. Fig. 2 show a typical «atelier» and a typical Medieval European scribe. Fig. 3 shows different situations and scenarios in which a *quipucamayoc*, the administrative scribe of the Inca empire, performs his duty. It should not be surprising that the Spanish missionaries had more difficulties in dealing with a writing system such as the quipus than with the picto-ideographic and hieroglyphic writing of Mesoamerican cultures (chiefly Mexica and Maya). Armed with a philosophy of language and a system of discursive genres based on alphabetic writing, a European man of letters in the sixteenth century was not prepared to deal with a writing system that did not involve scratching of painting on a solid surface but, instead, was performed by knotting strings of different colors in a (apparently) loose sort of textile. Spanish intellectuals were so concerned with the origins and so taken by the virtues of alphabetic writing that it did not occur to them to make the connection between text and textile, and to see the act of weaving as an apt medieval metaphor for both weaving letters and weaving strings. Finally, Fig. 4 shows the transformation of the *quipucamayoc* into an official scribes when alphabetic writing began to replace, in the administrative organization of the Spanish empire, the *quipu* and the *quipucamayoc* as graphic signs of counting, memory and narratives.

To compare an ornate, Medieval copy of Virgil's *Georgic* with an oral narrative or a colored woven *quipu* would not be to the advantage of the *quipu* as far as the concept of «literature», exemplified by Virgil as one of the paradigmatic examples of general literary studies and of course of comparative literature, is concerned. What

this example of colonial semiosis shows is that comparative literature should be only a portion of comparative studies of semiotic interactions in colonial situations: the portions dealing with the canonical «literary» works produced in the colonies according to Western criteria. The corpus of colonial semiosis surpasses the literary canon and brings to the foreground not a set of texts to be interpreted but a domains of semiotic interactions in which oral traditions and different writing systems interact and produce a complex, exciting and forgotten field for comparative studies.

4. All these examples allow me to rethink the hermeneutic legacy in the context of colonial semiosis and comparative studies. If «hermeneutics» is defined not only as a reflection on human understanding, but also as human understanding itself, then the «tradition» in which hermeneutics has been founded and developed (Mueller-Vollmer 1985) has to be recast in terms of the plurality of cultural traditions and across cultural boundaries (Larson and Deutsch 1988). Thus, colonial situations and colonial semiosis present a hermeneutical dilemma for the understanding subject. Historically, the study and analysis of colonial situations have been performed from those points of view prevalent in different domains of the colonizing cultures, even when the interpreter took a position in favor of some aspects of the colonized[10]. «Colonial semiosis» brings to the foreground the following dilemma: what is the locus of enunciation from which the understanding subject understands colonial situations? In other words, in which of the cultural traditions to be understood does the understanding subject places him/herself? These questions are not only relevant when broad cultural issues such as colonial situations and colonial semiosis are being considered, but also when more specific issues such as race, gender, and class are brought into the field of comparative studies of literature.

The point I'm trying to make is that scholars studying the culture to which they belong (national, ethnic, or gender cultures) are not necessarily subjective, just as scholars studying cultures to which they do not belong are not necessarily objective. Since I believe that theories are not instruments to understand something that lies outside the theory but, on the contrary, that theories are instruments to construct knowledge and understanding, my use of «subjective» and «objective» are examples, not epistemological statements. Within a constructivist epistemology «subjective» means knowledge and understanding in which the personal and social situation of the knowing subject prevails over disciplinary rules and procedures. The inverse will hold for «objective»: disciplinary cognitive rules will prevail over personal desires, obsessions and interest. Accordingly, neither case could be said to provide a «better» (deeper, more accurate, more trustworthy, more informed, etc.) knowledge or understanding. For, if we approach knowledge and understanding from the point of view of a constructivist epistemology and hermeneutics, the audience being addressed and the researcher's agenda are as relevant to the construction of the object or subject being studies as are the subject or object being constructed. Thus, the locus of enunciation is as much a part of knowing and understanding as it is the construction

of the image of the «real» resulting from a disciplinary discourse (e.g., sociological, anthropological, historical, semiological, etc.). Consequently, the «true» account of a subject matter in the form of knowledge or understanding will be transacted in the respective communities of interpretation as much for its correspondence to what is taken for «real» as for the authorizing locus of enunciation constructed in the very act of describing an object or a subject. Furthermore, the locus of enunciation of the discourse being interpreted would not be understood in itself but in the context of previous loci or enunciation that the current discourse contest, corrects, and/or expands. It is as much the *saying* (and the audience involved) as it is what is *said* (and the world referred to) that preserves or transforms the image of the real constructed by previous acts of saying and previous utterances.

A *quipucamayoc* who became a scribe might have done so only on a superficial level. The physical act of writing might not have been enough to erase the habits, memories and social context of a long tradition of writing with strings. The hybrid and fractured reality we perceive in Fig. 4 is not something of the past which occurred at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century. Besides a changing terminology which distinguishes between colonial, post-colonial and Third World societies, I perceive colonial semiosis as a concept relevant for all of them, as illustrated in a recent statement by Gomez-Peña, a Chicano writer and artist:

> I live smack in the fissure between two worlds, in the infected wound: half a block from the end of Western Civilization and four miles from the start of the Mexican-American border, the northernmost point of Latin America. In my fractured reality, but a reality nonetheless, there cohabit two histories, languages, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and political systems which are drastically counterposed (Gomez-Peña 1988).

The interrelations of colonial semiosis as a network of processes to be understood and the locus of enunciation as a network of places of understanding, demand a diatopical or pluritopical hermeneutic while simultaneously illuminating the significance of the disciplinary as well the cultural (gender, race, class) inscription of the subject in the process of understanding. Two revealing examples in the field of literary and comparative studies are offered by Saldivar (1990) and Willis (1986).

Saldivar's target is the field of literary studies as practiced and exemplified in North American literary history and the need he perceives to frame the study of the literatures of the Americas in a comparative perspective. Saldivar's proposal is in fact very similar to Pizarro's. The examples they take and their relevance to the work of Fernández Retamar (1989) and the journal *Casa de las Américas* (of which Fernández Retamar has been its editor and its soul) speak of a common concern, although both were unaware of each other's work. The difference is that while Pizarro is a Chilean woman who frames comparatism from a Latin American and Latin Americanist perspective, Saldívar is a Chicano male who frames comparatism from a Mexico-American and Latin American perspective. As a Chicano, Saldívar is in a position to

make a move which actualizes and discloses the need of a pluritopic hermeneutic: he proposes the inclusion of the Cuban poets and revolutionaries Jose Martí and Fernández Retamar as «oppositional voices to be included in OUR (a comparative history of the literature of the Americas) literary history» (1990: 63). The field of study is thus redefined, once again, from the perspective of a pluritopical hermeneutics. As Saldivar himself puts it:

> What lies behind this essay, then, is a growing awareness on my part of the extremely narrow confines and conservative practices of literary study as it is now performed in the academy, and with that, a growing conviction about the social and political implications of this exclusionary practice. As *a literary theoretician outside the mainstream and educated in a segregated farm society in south Texas, I have been particularly sensitive to the absence of writers from what Marti called* «our America» — a Pan-American culture of descendants, both ethnically and culturally speaking, of aborigines, *mestizos*, Africans, and Europeans. It is my view that the greatest shortcoming of the literary historical work being done on the American canon is not its lack of theoretical rigor but rather its parochial vision. American literary historians (even the newer ones) and critics working on the reconstruction of American literary history characteristically know little in depth about the history, cultures, and discourses of the Americas as a totality. *One of the values of a comparative focus is that it permits us to escape, at least to some extent, from the provincialism and limiting set of tacit assumptions that tend to result from perpetual immersion in the study of a single American culture or literature* (Saldivar 1990: 63; italics mine).

Such a redefinition of the field goes hand in hand with the relocation of the comparing and understanding subject; in this case, a subject relocated outside the monotopic hermeneutic of Anglo or Spanish American literary history and on the border (or cross-roads) between linguistic and literary cultures, on the one hand, and gender, class and race, on the other.

Willis (1986), an American woman who reads conflicting and oppositional Caribbean writers, takes a position similar to Saldívar. By reading and revealing a conception of space and geography in Caribbean writers such as Lamming or Cesaire which resist the all-encompassing geometric and hegemonic map charted by the colonizer, Willis is not only disclosing an alternative view of a field of study but also relocating the understanding subject. As a North American woman who reveals the resisting voices of the Caribbean male, she has constructed a diatopical *locus* of enunciation from where her resisting voice joins the voices coming from different corners of the Americas. In both cases, Saldívar and Willis, we witness not only an alternative view of the field of study and the introduction of a comparative perspective but, mainly, the introduction of a comparative perspective which relocates the understanding subject: no longer the homogenous subject of a monotopic and

universal hermeneutic but the hybrid, fractured subject of regional and pluritopic understanding.

5. What do I mean, specifically, by diatopical or pluritopical hermeneutics and alternative methodology? Gadamer (1976: 28) has written a clear paragraph about the goals and justification of philosophical hermeneutics:

> My thesis is — and I think it is a necessary consequence of recognizing the operativeness of history in our conditionedness and finitude — that the thing which hermeneutics teaches us is to see through the dogmatism of asserting and opposition and separation between the *ongoing, natural tradition* and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen — even in the so-called sciences of understanding like history — not in relationship to the *hermeneutic situation* and the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event (italics mine).

I accept Gadamer's criticism of a positivistc conception of knowledge and understanding on the same ground that I accept O'Gorman's (O'Gorman 1947) criticism of positivistic historiography. Both come from the same source: Heidegger's critique of historiographical understanding (Heidegger <1927>, 1951). However, the position taken in this article differs from that of Gadamer's and follows that of O'Gorman (1947; 1961) in two aspects[11]:

a) Gadamer's notion of «ongoing, natural tradition» presupposes a monotopic hermeneutic in which the *locus* of enunciation of s/he who understands, belongs to the same tradition in which the very act of understanding contributes to construction (or invention). Gadamer's «natural tradition», enunciated in the context of German philosophy, presupposes the classical (Greco-Roman) tradition. Instead, a colonial situation implies, by definition, a plurality of traditions (existing Amerindian communities living and building on their own past, like the Chamulas studied by Gossen [1972]; or the pluricultural situation in Perú studied by Ballón Aguirre (1987) as well as a hybrid dimension emerging from the mutual transculturation of colonized and colonizing members participating in the same domain of semiotic interactions;

b) The previous distinctions encourage a redefinition of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Colonial situations, contrary to «ongoing natural traditions», postulate a plurality of traditions and, consequently, of locus of enunciation and of understanding. If «natural» traditions are questioned and regionalized (e.g., there are as many natural traditions as there are communities inventing them), then the universal position of the understanding subject cannot longer be maintained. Race, gender, class, nationality, etc., are all important dimensions in the process of understanding itself as well as in the disciplinary decision process in which the

question «what is to be understood» is answered. On the other hand, if we take into account that the understanding subject is a composite of cultuural factors and that the past is to be understood as a plurality of traditions, a diatopical (or pluritopical) understanding implies a comparative grasping of semiotic interactions across cultural boundaries as well as a self-awareness of the *locus enuntiationis:* the understanding subject's «positionality» vis-a-vis the phenomena to be understood and the community to which the outcome of the act of understanding will be communicated. Who is understanding what and why is not only applicable to the phenomena to be understood (e.g., colonial semiosis) but also to the *locus enuntiationis* in which the act of understanding takes place. The goal of this essay can now be restated. The pluricultural nature of colonial semiosis, as the field to be understood, calls for a rethinking of the philosophical foundations of the act of understanding.

Thus, colonial situations challenge the principles upon which a philosophical and monotopic hermeneutic rests. The «natural» tradition is either the monotopic understanding of the past constructed in/by the language and tradition of the interpreter (Spanish, as my native tongue, or English, as the language in which I chose to write this article), which suppresses the «natural» tradition to which the understander does not belong, although it is an essential component of the matter to be understoodd. However, if a pluritopic understanding of colonial semiosis requires a comparative methodology, we might, then, esasily fall into the trap that comparative understanding is in itself a product of colonial expansions (Winter 1976; Pagden 1982; Mason 1990). Furthermore, it would be possible to argue that while most comparative studies (of literatures, of religions, of languages, of territorial representations) are founded on a monotopic hermeneutic, an alternative and diatopic comparison is at the same time a need and a challenge. A need because colonial situations introduce the asymmetry of power relations between the two (or more) poles to be compared; a challenge, because an alternative methodology has to deal with and detach itself from the presuppositions of the established methodology and philosophical foundation from which it departs, in this case, comparatism and monotopic hermeneutics.

Notes

[1] Although Comparative Literature has been accepted as the official name of the discipline, I will use the expression «comparative studies of literature» for reasons that I have discussed elsewhere (Mignolo 1989a). The fact that by «literature» we refer both to literary practice and to literary studies, have been transferred to the designation of «comparative literature» as a discipline. However, the transference has not been felicitous. While «literature» could be properly applied to designate a verbal and artistic practices, «comparative literature» doesn't make to much sense when is applied under similar conditions.

[2] There are always exceptions to the rules and one of them is the work of Guillen (1985) who practiced comparative literary studies having as his paradigmatic example Spanish Golden Age Literature.

[3] Examples in comparative studies of literature in which the comparing subject becomes an issue could be found, in the case of India, in Dev 1987; Jain 1989; and Kumar Das 1989;

and in Africa, in Chinweizu (1980), Schipper (1989), Miller (1990). On the other hand, Daiyun (1989) provides a good example of how the European paradigm of comparative studies could be non-critically employed and preserved in non-European cultural traditions.

[4] The emphasis on method in both literary and comparative studies (Fokkema 1982) contributed to hide the fact that the problem was not just in the ways literature was being studied, but in the very configuration of the field of study. This conflict is felt, although not explicitly formulated, in Eagelton's quarrel with the definition of literature, the role of literary theory and the «foucauldian» alternative he proposes at the end of the book (Eagealton 1982). For a criticism of his position see Mignolo (1990b) and for an example of how literary studies could contribute to the understanding of discoursive formations other than literature Mignolo (1981).

[5] With the exception of Brazil, where comparative literary studies has a long and solid tradition (Franco Carvalhal, 1986; Coutinho, 1983).

[6] Jain (1989: 81) addressed the same question in the case of India: «The business of conducting a comparative study of various literatures in the West and various national literatures in India is not quite the same. The fact that Indian literatures are a product of a multiracial and multicultural social-historical melange cannot be overlooked. Both those who have their roots in a common linguistic stock, and those who have stemmed from different linguistic stocks, share and are bound together by common sociocultural and historical bonds. The pertinent questions is whether in order to get a real insight into this situations, a comparative study should or should not first operate on an intranational plane before moving on to an international plane». Dev (1987: 19) and Kumar Das (1989: 102) have underlined the fact that India is not only a multilingual and multiracial country, but it is also a Third World country and that, therefore, the tools of Western comparison are hardly adequate to deal with their literary situations. For instance, drama, lyric and narrative are three major and productive categories for a «comparative poetics» of the Western world (Miner 1990), but they are full of difficulties if some one attempts to apply them to «Nahuatl literature» (or the verbal production of the Mexica of pre-columbian central Mexico), as Garibay intended to do (Garibay 1954). When applied to colonial situations, drama, lyric and narrative as defined in Renaissance poetic treatises must, on the one hand, be redefined to account for hybrid cultural artifacts produced in colonial situations and, on the other, be supplemented with discursive genres totally outside of the realm of Western oral and written practices (see, for instance, Gossen 1974).

[7] The experience of reading and comparing several of the articles compiled by Koelb and Noakes (1988) with some of the articles compiled by Dev and Kumar Das (1989), might illustrate what I have in mind. In the first example, the universality of the understanding comparing subject is never questionned. It is assumed that there are different manifestations of a universal of culture which is literature and that comparative studies will help to understand it. In the second example, in which the participants are mainly from India and China, the issue comes directly or indirectly more forcefully. Daiyun's (1989) article is to me a clear example of how Western principles and standard of comparative literature could function in the colonization of non-Western minds. Instead, Dev (1989: 319-328) and Kumar Das (1989: 94-106), in the same volume, invite critical questions about the understanding subject as well as the concept of «literature» to define the field of comparative studies in India (for the case of Africa, see Chinweizu (1987) and Albert (1990: 3-24; 71-78).

[8] This position has been clearly articulated by Hirsch (1987). A critical position can be found in Herrstein Smith (1990).

[9] I am not using the expression «Third at World» for its denotative and ontological meaning (e.g., that there is such an entitity), but for the locus of enunciation it implies: a knowing or understanding subject whom by creating the notion, places him or herself in the «First World». For more details see Pletscht (1981).

[10] Some times it is difficult to avoid binary oppositions even when one knows that colonial situations are more complex than what a binary opposition shows. If, on the one hand, the two ends of the spectrum set the stage, there are also intermediary situations in which members of the colonized cultures recognize and become part of the colonized culture and viceversa, members of the colonized cultures adopt the *modus vivendi* of the colonizer.

[11] O'Gorman's engagement with colonial situations went beyond proper and relevant disciplinary (historiography) issues. It was a political and ideological concern relevant in Mexico of the fifties, together with a reassessment of historiographical goals prompted by his reading of Heidegger, that oriented the questions he asked in his research. O'Gorman's demolition of four hundred years of historiographical writing about the «discovery» of America was achieved from the point of view of an historian and of a creole who, although ignoring the Amerindian perspective, hinted toward the role of the locus of enunciation in the process of understanding.

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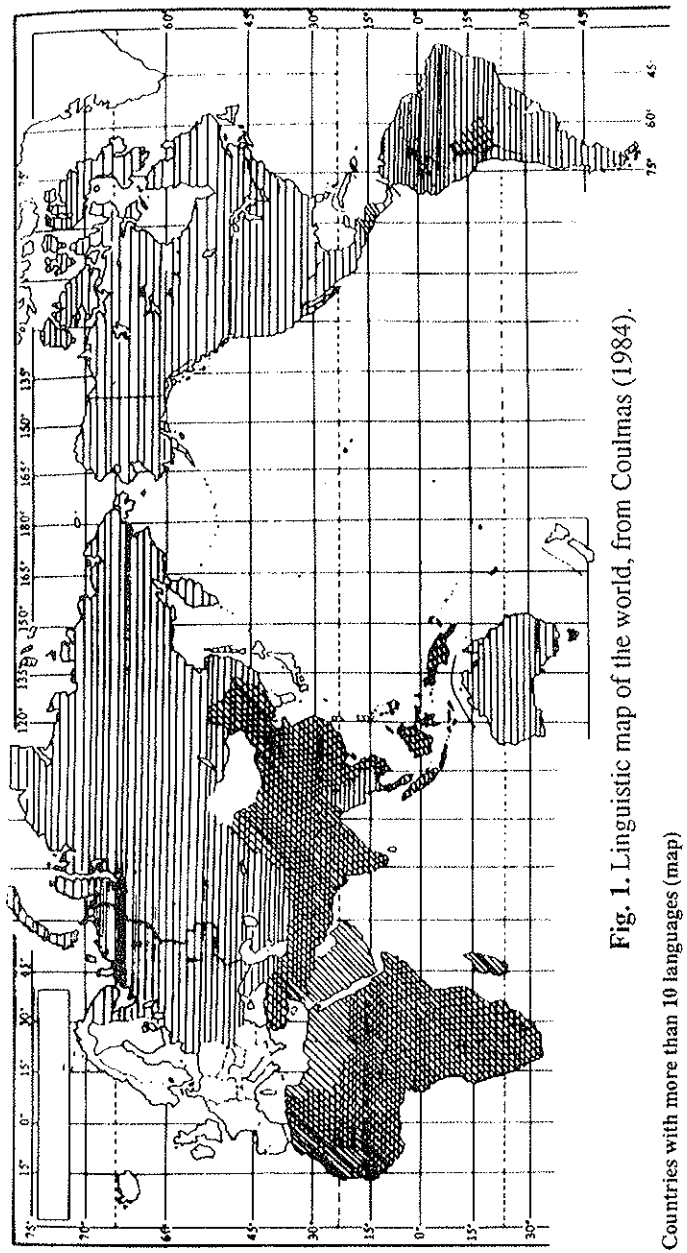

Fig. 1. Linguistic map of the world, from Coulmas (1984).

Countries with more than 10 languages (map)

Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra-Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Upper Volta, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kampuchea, Laos, Malaysia, Nepall, Pakistán, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Vietnam

USA, Canada, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Venezuela

USSR

Australia

Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Kiribati, Nauru, Micronesia (U.S. Trust Territory)

Legend

more than 10 languages per country

illiteracy over 40% of population

Fig. 2. Illumination of Virgil's work, showing a writer «attelier» (toward 1475). From *Le livre au moyen age*. Sour la direction de J. Glenisson. Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1988. Original at the Bibliotheque Municipal de Dijon, No. 493, fol. 29).

Fig. 3. Four illustrations of an Inca *Quipucamayoc*. Guaman Poma de Ayala. *Nueva coronica y buen gobierno* (between 1584 and 1614). Paris, 1936.

Fig. 4. The *quipucamayoc* converted into *scribe* (Guaman Poma de Ayala, *ibidem.*), an hybrid social role symbolizing colonial semiosis and colonial situations.