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On the Colonization of Amerindian Languages and Memories: Renaissance Theories of Writing and the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition

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When George Balandier proposed his theoretical approach to a colonial situation, the colonization of language was not an issue that piqued the interest of scholars in history, sociology, economics, or anthropology, which were the primary disciplines targeted in his article. When some fifteen years later Michel Foucault underlined the social and historical significance of language (“l’*énoncé*”) and discursive formation, the colonization of language was still not an issue to those attentive to the archaeology of knowledge. Such an archaeology, founded on the paradigmatic example generally understood as the Western tradition, overlooked the case history in which an archaeology of discursive formation would have led to the very root of the massive colonization of language which began in the sixteenth century with the expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Edward Said went one step further than Foucault by departing from his notion of discursive formation to confront the West’s construction of the East and in doing so opened up the doors to understanding the role of discourse in colonial situations. In the late 1950s Edmundo O’Gorman opened the doors to deconstructing the discursive formation he identified as the invention of America, which he described as the emergence of the idea of America in the European consciousness and which can be perceived today as similar to what Said identified and described as Orientalism. In fact, O’Gorman’s argument shows that the image of a new

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continent discovered one happy day in October of 1492 is, indeed, an ideological construction presupposing that America was an already existing entity awaiting discovery.¹

The common denominator of all the preceding examples, which serves as a point of departure for my reflections upon the colonization of language, is the convergence of the geographical, religious, and economical expansion of the West toward the end of the fifteenth and during the sixteenth centuries² with the ideology of the letter built around alphabetic writing and printing technology.³ Scholars in the human sciences have previously made convincing arguments that linking a form of writing with an economic structure and political design, not the invention of alphabetic writing, has proven the more fruitful model for tracing the great divide between literate and oral cultures and in accounting for the consequences of literacy.⁴ Thus, I would like to put forth the question of the colonization of language within the specific context of European expansion around the globe and the emergence of comparative ethnology.⁵ My efforts here are devoted to understanding the European philo-

¹ George Balandier "La situation coloniale. Approche théorique," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, xi (1951), 44–79; George W. Stocking, Jr., ed., *Colonial Situations. Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), especially Talal Asad's article, "From the History of Colonial Anthropology to the Anthropology of Western Hegemony" (pp. 314–24), from which I could have benefitted had I not read that book and that article after already finishing this article; Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America. An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961); Y. E. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). A thesis similar to the one advanced by O'Gorman has been recently proposed in Mexico by Leopoldo Zea, *Discurso desde la marginación y la barbarie* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988); and in Egypt by Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System. Capitalist Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, I:346–58 (New York: Academe Press, 1974).

³ Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. Communication and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Colin Clair, *A History of European Printing* (New York, 1976); Walter D. Mignolo, "Literacy and Colonization: The New World Experience," *Hispanic Issues*, 4 (1989), 51–96; and "Nebrija in the New World; The Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition and the Colonization of Native Languages," *L'Homme* (a special issue devoted to *La re-decouverte de l'Amérique*), in *Revue Française d'Anthropologie*, no. 122–24 (avril–décembre 1992), xxxii, 187–209.

⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality. Studies in the Technology of Communication* (London: Blackwell, 1988); Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and "Literacy and Social Change: The Significance of Social Context in the Development of Literacy Programs," in D. Wagner, ed., *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, I:48–64 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987).

⁵ Sylvia Winter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics: A First International Symposium*, M. Benamou and J. Rothemberg, eds., 78–94 (Boston, 1976); Michael T. Ryan, "Assimilating New Worlds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23:4 (1981), 519–38; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object*, 105–43 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man. The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

sophical background which inspired Spanish missionaries and men of letters to spread Western literacy in the colonies. I am interested, briefly, in understanding the philosophy of languages behind the Spaniards' intellectual decision to write grammars of Amerindian languages and to write histories of Amerindian memories as well as in the discontinuity of the classical tradition (implied in the spread of Western literacy) manifested in numerous and varied acts of resistance.

O'Gorman's contribution is a useful starting point to frame the complicity between the Renaissance philosophy of language, historiographical writing, and the idea of the book in the invention of America. This ideological network, in which writing grammars of Amerindian languages and writing histories of Amerindian memories were grounded, is complex indeed. Unfortunately, the foundations on which European men of letters built their paradigm of the civilizing process prevented them from understanding networks of similar complexity within the Amerindian cultures. Thus, the encounters between people with different approaches to language, writing, and recording the past led to the suppression of Amerindian writing systems and the transformation of their speaking and writing habits as well as to the dissemination of ideas among the European reading public that Amerindians were less civilized because they lacked letters, did not have history, and had painted books dictated by the devil. This image was certainly a regional one which acquired a universal value in the eyes of Europe. I will conclude by showing, however, that the Spaniards' effort to introduce alphabetic writing and to write histories of Amerindian memories spawned the appropriation of Western writing technology and acts of resistance which disrupted the expansion of Western literacy, produced a break in the continuity of the classical tradition, and showed the limits of any attempt to universalize regional perspectives.

WRITING GRAMMARS OF AMERINDIAN LANGUAGES

I define the colonization of language as the organization or arrangement (from the Latin *colere*, to cultivate or design) of languages. And by language I refer to speech as well as to any set of signs governed by norms and conventions. This reminder is necessary when dealing with colonial situations after 1492, for the ideology of the letter established itself among European intellectuals (*letrados*) during this period, inverting the supremacy of the oral set forth in Plato's *Phaedrus* and disqualifying, by the same token, the relevance of nonalphabetic writings. I shall focus, then, on two interrelated systems of human interactions: the oral (a system of coded sounds activating the tongue and the ear) and the written (a system of coded graphic or visible signs activating the hand and the eyes).⁶ This distinction allows me to specify further

⁶ Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 139–74; Walter D. Mignolo, "(Re)modeling the Letter: Literacy and Literature between Semiotics and Literary Studies," M. Anderson and F. Merrell, eds., *On Semiotic Modelling*, 357–95 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991).

that by colonization of language I mean the actions taken and strategies employed by missionaries and men of letters to (re)organize Amerindian speech by writing grammars, Amerindian writing systems by introducing the Latin alphabet, and Amerindian memories by implanting Renaissance discursive genres conceived in the experience of alphabetic writing.⁷ It is obvious,⁸ but often forgotten, that the sophisticated generic classification common to a European *letrado* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had little to do with discursive typologies of human communities outside of the classical tradition (see section entitled, "The Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition," below).⁹ In examining the colonization of language from this perspective I will also take into account the underlying philosophy that justified the actions taken by missionaries and men of letters in colonizing different areas of the so-called New World. Although the missionaries were active in writing grammars and in programming the process of conversion, the men of letters were active in writing laws for the administration of the new possessions and in figuring out how to write histories of Amerindian memories.

Writing grammars was one important set of actions and strategies which the Spaniards employed to (re)organize and (re)arrange the languages of native communities. The significance of the process is still perhaps little understood, although quite well known.¹⁰ For, what is at stake when language systems in which the distance between the oral and the written is considerably larger than the one existing in languages with alphabetic or syllabic writing systems begin to be organized according to the rules made explicit for languages with a long alphabetic written tradition? In grammar after grammar of Amerindian languages written during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the authors

⁷ Bernard Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961); Antonio García Berrio, *Formación de la teoría literaria moderna, Renacimiento Europeo* (Madrid: Planeta, 1977).

⁸ For the meaning and semantic changes of the word *litteratus/letrado*, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, see Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066–1307* (London, 1979); Aron Gurevich, "Popular Culture and Medieval Latin Literature from Caesarius of Arles to Caesarius of Heisterbach," in his *Medieval Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Luis Gil Fernández, *Panorama Social del Humanismo Español (1500–1800)* (Madrid: Alambra, 1981).

⁹ Geneviève Calame-Griaule, *Ethnologie et langage. La parole chez les Dogon*, 104–85 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965); Gary Gossen, "Chamula Genres of Verbal Behavior," *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), 147–67; Raymond Firth, "Speech-Making and Authority in Tikopia," in *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*, M. Bloch, ed., 29–44 (London: Academe Press, 1975); Walter D. Mignolo, "Qué clases los textos son géneros? Fundamentos de tipología textual," *Acta Poética*, 4–5 (1982–83), 25–51.

¹⁰ The politics of language in México has been studied by Shirley Brice-Heat, *La política del lenguaje en México: de la colonia a la nación* (México: Secretaría de Educación Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1972) and by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Lenguas vernáculas. Su uso y desuso en la enseñanza: la experiencia de México* (México: La Casa Chata, 1983). Ascensión León-Portilla has traced the history of the grammars of the Náhuatl language written in México: *Teputlahcuilolli. Impresos en Náhuatl. Historia y bibliografía* (México: Universidad Nacional de México, 1988).

took for granted that Latin was a universal linguistic system which could be used to supply the explicit structure for those languages whose grammar had not yet been written. Such a conviction was so strong that Domingo de Santo Tomas (1499–1570), for instance, wrote in the prologue to his grammar of Quechua that this language “is so in agreement with Latin and Castilian in its structure that it looks almost like a premonition [prediction] that the Spaniards will possess it” (“tan conforme a la latina y española y en el arte y artificio della, que no parece sino que fue un pronóstico que los españoles la habían de poseer”).¹¹ Thus, we should clearly understand that the significance of writing grammars of primordially spoken languages in colonizing those languages to secure the classical tradition is that they are not only re-arranged but also possessed and assimilated. Such an observation does not deny the good intentions and the outstanding contributions of the grammarians, such as Domingo de Santo Tomas in Perú, Alonso de Molina (d. 1585), and Horacio Carochi (d. 1662) in México, to preserve and understand that which they also helped to suppress.¹² It merely points toward the philosophy of language and the civilizing ideology founded in their own construction of the classical legacy to justify the colonization of Amerindian languages and memories. When Carochi noted, for instance, that Náhuatl lacked seven letters, he was acting under the assumption that the Latin alphabet was a universal model to represent linguistic sounds, and when it so happened that a non-Western language (like the Náhuatl) did not have all the sounds that can be represented by the universal (Roman) alphabet, the language was at fault.¹³ It should be added, however, that my emphasis is neither on the aftermath of written grammar in the Amerindian population nor on the question of whether writing grammars of Amerindian languages devoured and supplanted the implicit grammars of the native speakers. I am concerned with the philosophy and ideology of writing which supported the decision made by missionaries and men of letters to write grammars of Amerindian languages that assumed the grammar of Latin was the universal model to follow.

I am referring to a particular kind of possession and assimilation. It differs from what is also, in fact, colonization, possession, and the continuity of

¹¹ *Grammatica o Arte de la lengua general de los Indios de los reynos del Perú* (Quito: Instituto Historico Dominicano, 1947).

¹² Alonso de Molina, *Arte de la lengua Mexicana y Castellana* (México: En Casa di Antonio de Espinosa, 1571); Horacio Carochi, *Arte de la lengua mexicana con la declaración de los adverbios della* (México: Ivan Ruyz, 1640).

¹³ Carochi, *Arte de la lengua mexicana*, ch. 1. Readers not acquainted with the history of writing and with Amerindian writing systems would profit from consulting W. Senner, ed., *The Origins of Writing* (Lincoln, Neb.: Nebraska University Press, 1989). See particularly, Rex Wallace, “The Origins and Development of the Latin Alphabet,” 121–36, and Floyd G. Laounsbury “The Ancient Writing of Middle America,” 203–38. For the Peruvian *quipu* as a writing system, see M. Ascher and R. Ascher, *Code of the Quipu. A Study in Media, Mathematics, and Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1981).

languages and traditions in the expansion of Amerindian cultures before the Spanish invasion. Acosta, among many others, reported that:

At the same time that the rulers of Mexico and Cuzco were conquering lands, they were also introducing their language, because although there was and still is a great diversity of languages among different communities, the courtly language of Cuzco [Quechua] has been expanding for over five thousand leagues, and so should also have been expanded the language of Mexico [Náhuatl].¹⁴

Acosta was certainly not interested in exploring the implications of the colonization of language but, rather, in looking for the short cuts and advantages in the process of conversion. His observation is useful, nevertheless, because it helps us to understand the imposition of languages during territorial expansion in pre-Columbian times by comparing it with the imposition of Castilian and the possession of Amerindian languages during territorial expansion in the context of the modern world system. In the second case, both alphabetical writing and printing allowed the Spanish missionaries and *letrados* not only to possess Amerindian languages by writing their grammars and then reproduce and distribute them in printed form, but the missionaries and *letrados* were also instrumental in suppressing the Amerindian's own writing systems and in imposing the Castilian language and the Roman alphabet.¹⁵

The action of writing grammars of Amerindian languages was connected to the Spanish colonization in a well-known anecdote. In it, Queen Isabella, who was born in the year printing was invented, received the first Castilian grammar from Elio Antonio de Nebrija, who published one of the first grammars of any modern European language in the same year in which Columbus made Europeans aware of people and lands on this earth unknown to them. The way in which Nebrija (or rather the Bishop of Avila) told the Queen that grammars were necessary for the consolidation of kingdoms has often been mentioned and celebrated:

Now, Your Majesty, let me come to the last advantage that you shall gain from my grammar. For the purpose, recall the time when I presented you with a draft of this book earlier this year in Salamanca. At this time, you asked me what end such a grammar could possibly serve. Upon this, the Bishop of Avila interrupted to answer in my stead. What he said was this: "Soon Your Majesty will have placed her yoke upon many barbarians who speak outlandish tongues. By this, your victory, these people shall stand in a new need; the need for the laws the victor owes to the vanquished, and

¹⁴ José de Acosta. *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590), vol. vi, ch. 20 (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1962).

¹⁵ The processes of transformation and ultimate obliteration of Amerindian writing systems have been studied by Birgit Scharlau and Mark Munzel, *Qellqay. Mundliche Kultur und Schrifttradition bei Indianern Lateinamerikas*, 97–155, 171–220 (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1986); and by Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l'imaginaire. Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol, XVIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

the need for the language we shall bring with us." My grammar shall serve to impart them the Castilian tongue, as we have used grammar to teach Latin to our young.¹⁶

The concise and powerful argument advanced in the introductory notes to his *Gramatica* are well known and are not necessary to detail here.¹⁷ One of the remarkable features of Nebrija's argument, however, was his claim that a pact existed between "armas y letras" at the precise moment when the Kingdom of Castile was becoming a modern state ruled by men of letters. The flourishing of the arts, especially the art of languages or grammatica, was rhetorically emphasized by Nebrija, who contrasted the image of a new beginning with the ruins left by the enemies of the Christian faith:

Now that the Church has been purified, and we are thus reconciled to God, now that the enemies of the Faith have been subdued by our arms, now that just laws are being enforced, enabling us all to live as equals, what else remains but the flowering of the peaceful arts. And among the arts, foremost are those of language, which sets us apart from the wild animals; language, which is the unique distinction of man, the means for the kind of understanding which can be surpassed only by contemplation.¹⁸

It comes as no surprise that Queen Isabella was striving to understand what uses a grammar of a vernacular language could possibly have. Although she was aware of the prestige that a grammar, a form restricted until then to the languages in the Scriptures (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin), would bring to her tongue, she had not yet made the connection that colonization would create between language and power. To think about such issues was the task of the humanist (*litteratus*) and man of letters (*jurisperitus*) rather than for women of arms. Nebrija was very familiar with Lorenzo Valla's reevaluation of letters in order to save the Roman Empire from total ruin.¹⁹ He is credited with the introduction of humanist ideas in Spain, and as a humanist, Nebrija knew that the power of a unified language, through its grammar, lay in teaching it to barbarians, as well as controlling their languages by writing their grammars. Nebrija was able to persuade Queen Isabella that her destiny was not only to conquer but also to civilize. The expression "to civilize," rather than "to

¹⁶ "Prologue," *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (Salamanca, 1492; rpt., London: Oxford University Press, 1926).

¹⁷ Eugenio Ascencio, "La lengua compañera del imperio: historia de una idea de Nebrija en España y Portugal," *Revista de Filología Española*, 43 (1960), 399–413; Francisco Rico, *Nebrija contra los bárbaros. El cánon de gramáticos nefastos en las polémicas del humanismo* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1978); Victor García de la Concha, ed., *Nebrija y la introducción del renacimiento en España* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1981).

¹⁸ Nebrija, "Prologue," *Gramática de la lengua castellana*.

¹⁹ Lorenzo Valla, "In sex libros Elegantiarum preafatio," *Prosatori Latini del Quattrocento. A cura di E. Garin* (Milano: Mondadori, 1952); Ottavio Besomi e Mariagneli Regoliosi, *Lorenzo Valla e l'umanesimo italiano. Atti del convegno internazionale studi umanistici* (Padova: Editrici Antenore, 1986). Franco Gaeta, *Lorenzo Valla: filologia e storia nell'umanesimo italiano* (Napoli: Nello sede del Istituto, 1955).

colonize,” serves to represent the program and motivations of the sixteenth-century men of letters.

In order to understand Nebrija’s strategy it is necessary to understand that his argument rested on a philosophy of language whose roots could be traced back to Saint Augustine and the merging of Platonic and Christian tradition to solve the problem of a unified language needed to counteract the plurality of existing tongues and also to Valla’s (1406–57) *Latinae linguae elegantiarum libri sex*, written to save Christian Rome from linguistic and cultural illiteracy (*barbarus*). In Spain, some forty years after Nebrija composed his grammar, Luis Vives (familiar with Saint Augustine’s work and responsible for the critical edition of his works orchestrated by Desiderio Erasmus), was delineating *la questione de la lingua* in terms of the contrast between the primordial language spoken by Adam and the event that initiated linguistic diversity, the Tower of Babel.²⁰

Saint Augustine’s strong belief in one original language comes from the evidence of the Scriptures and also from his Platonic theoretical framework. As a Neoplatonic and a Christian, Saint Augustine, in his reading of the Holy Book, assumed that the metaphysical principles of an original unity could account for the plurality and multiplicity of things. The original unified language, according to Saint Augustine, need not and could not be named because it was not necessary to distinguish it from other human languages. It could be called human language or human locution.²¹ However, not even one unified human language was enough to keep human beings, who attempted to build a tower to reach heaven, happy and to restrain them from transgressing the law. The subsequent division of languages caused the division of people and communities into seventy-two parts, with each identified by a particular name. At this point it became necessary to find a name for the primordial language in order to distinguish it from the rest. Saint Augustine had good reason to believe that the original (primordial) language was Hebrew.

Although Vives was acquainted with Saint Augustine and was developing a philosophy of language that would be used, directly or indirectly, by the missionaries colonizing native languages,²² Nebrija was somehow rewriting the program that Valla outlined in the preface to his *Linguae latinae elegantiorum* (Valla 1952). Valla realized that the goal of rebuilding an empire could be achieved by letters, not arms. By contrasting the Latin of his ancestors with the expansion of the Roman Empire and by underscoring the strength of that

²⁰ Luis Vives, *De tradendis disciplinis* (1533?), vol. 4:299–300 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1913).

²¹ *De civitate Dei*, Book XVI, ch. 11, in Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Eva Mathews Sanford, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

²² See for instance Vázquez de Espinosa’s narrative (1620), in which he “naturally” harmonized the history of Amerindian languages with the confusion of tongues after Babel and the migration of the ten tribes of Israel to the New World (*Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales*, III:14 [Madrid: Atlas 1969]).

language as a unifying force over the geographical conquests, Valla foresaw that Rome would recover its lost power, and as a consequence, he predicted the central role that Italy would play in the future. Certainly, it was difficult for Nebrija, in 1492, to anticipate much about the future colonization of the New World and the Philippines.²³ It should have been clear to him, however, that Castile had an opportunity to take the place of the Roman Empire. If the preface to his *Gramatica Castellana* was indeed a rewriting of Valla's preface, the historical conditions had changed: While Valla was attempting to save a previously established empire from further decadence, Nebrija was predicting the construction of a new one.

There are other issues deserving comparison. Valla's fight against the barbarians, his belief that the history of civilization is the history of language (in anticipation of Vico), and the strong connections he perceived between language and empire are issues which Nebrija repeated over and over again. There are, however, some significant differences: Nebrija visualized the center of the empire in Castile instead of Italy and envisioned Castilian as the language of the empire instead of Latin. Thus, it naturally follows that both the grammars and histories of the native Amerindian languages were written mainly in Castilian; however, these grammars were modelled after Nebrija's Latin (not Castilian) grammar and the histories were modelled after classical historiography.²⁴ From these differences came the tension between Latin as the language of learning and Castilian as the language of politics and conversion. The time had arrived, then, to move from writing the grammars of native languages to writing the histories of native memories.

WRITING HISTORIES OF AMERINDIAN MEMORIES:

WRITTEN NARRATIVES, BOOKS AND TRUTH

The first histories of the Amerindian cultures known in Europe were written by members of the culture that introduced Western literacy to the natives.²⁵ In

²³ For the influence of Nebrija in writing grammars of Tagalog, see Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²⁴ It has been taken for granted among Nahuatl specialists that Nebrija's Castilian grammar was the model followed to write the grammars of Amerindian languages. See, for instance, Frances Karttunen, "Nahuatl Literacy," in G. A. Collier, R. Rosaldo, and J. D. Wirth, eds., *The Inca and Aztec States: 1400-1800*, 396 (New York: Academic Press, 1982); Ascensión León-Portilla, *Tepuztlahcuilolli. Impresos en Nahuatl. Historia y bibliografía*, 6 (México: UNAM, 1988). The same beliefs have been expressed about the Tagalog language in the Philippines by Vicente Rafael, in *Contracting Colonialism. Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, 23-54 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). I have argued, elsewhere (Walter D. Mignolo, "Nebrija in the New World: The Question of the Letter, the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition and the Colonization of Native Languages," *L'Homme*, no. 122-24 (avril-décembre 1992), xxxii, 187-209), that the Latin rather than the Castilian grammar served as a model. But, more important, the two ideological programs articulated by Nebrija in each grammar should be taken into account when dealing with the colonization of native languages.

²⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, "Cartas, crónicas y relaciones del descubrimiento y de la conquista,"

the process, the Amerindian forms of recording the past and transmitting it to future generations suffered the consequences of literacy because they had to learn a new form of writing and reading and because their histories were being narrated (perhaps without their knowledge) by those who were introducing the alphabet.²⁶ Spanish historiographers acted in the belief that the alphabet was a necessary condition of historiographical writing. They recognized that the Amerindians had the means to record the past (either by oral narratives, in pictoideographic writing or by means of the quipu), although the missionaries and men of letters did not acknowledge that it was the Amerindian equivalent to historiographical writing.

Once it was concluded that the Amerindians did not have historiography, Spanish chroniclers appointed themselves to write and put into a coherent form the narratives that, according to their perception, Amerindians told in a thoroughly incoherent manner.²⁷ When a situation such as this, in which the act of writing the history of a community means both suppressing and mistrusting the voices of a subjected community, arises, we are witnessing an example of the colonization of discursive types. History in the sense of narrative discourse about the past was a well-established discursive as well as a narrative form in the European Renaissance. The case seems similar to that of writing grammars. Written grammars took the place of the natives' implicit organization of languages, and writing histories took the place of natives' explicit recording of the past. Granted, these discursive practices might not have had a decisive influence within the Amerindian population; but they certainly were influential with those who held the power and made political decisions regarding the economic, political, pedagogical, and religious management of the New World. Thus, colonization does not necessarily mean that the Western grammars of Amerindian languages and Western histories of Amerindian memories devoured their languages and their memories by forcing them to radically change their linguistic and social habits. It means, basically, that the written grammars and histories took the place of Amerindian descriptions of their own linguistic interactions as well as their recording of their own past. In the case of written grammars, an implicit knowledge was ignored; in the case of narrative histories, an explicit knowledge (the knowl-

Luis Inigo Madrigal, coordinator, *Historia de la literatura Hispanoamericana. Epoca Colonial*, 57–125 (Madrid: CATEDRA, 1982), and "El metatexto historiográfico y la historiografía india," *Modern Language Notes*, 96 (1981), 358–402.

²⁶ Birgit Scharlau and Mark Munzel, *Quellqay. Mundliche Kultur und Schrittradition bei Indianern Lateinamerikas* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag 1986); Walter D. Mignolo, "Literacy and Colonization: The New World Experience," *Hispanic Issues*, 4 (1989), 51–96.

²⁷ Although this statement could be nuanced, there is a long tradition from Juan Ramón Pané (1493) to Fray Juan de Torquemada (1615), via José de Acosta (1590), in which this belief is clearly expressed. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Zur Frage der Schifftlichkeit in der Legitimation der Conquista," in *Der eroberte Kontinent. Historische Realitat, Rechtfertigung und literarische Darstellung der Kolonisation Amerikas*, K. Kohut, hrsq., 86–102 (Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 1991).

edge organized and transmitted in Amerindian oral and pictographic narratives) was rewritten. We can approach these issues from two different perspectives: the alphabet and the idea of the book and writing history.

Writing histories of non-Western human communities was one way of colonizing native memories. Genres (or discursive types), like grammars, are implicit in the discursive knowledge of the speakers. Among the Aztecs (or Mexica, as they called themselves), the categorization of discursive types (oral and written) seems to have been quite sophisticated indeed.²⁸ However, Spanish historians and missionaries did not pay them much attention, perhaps because they had their own renaissance theories of writing (poetry and rhetoric) and because the genre theories in the Renaissance were based on the Greco-Roman traditions and on the experience of alphabetic writing. Whatever went beyond or against its coherence was ignored. Today, changing perspectives in cognitive theories, in philosophy of language,²⁹ as well as in the empirical evidence about discursive categorization in Mesoamerica,³⁰ make it possible to explore this issue in more detail and to remove the (false) image that the continuity of the classical tradition could have contributed to the improvement of non-Western cultures. This belief, which was more clearly articulated during the French and English colonization of the nineteenth century,³¹ was no less obvious at the time of the Spanish and Christian expansion.

The conception of historical writing in the sixteenth century was not only closely related to the alphabet but also to the materiality and the idea of the book. I would like to consider, in this regard, two interrelated aspects: the colonization of writing (alphabetization) and the colonization of sign carriers (the Western book as an organizer of knowledge). The book in sixteenth-century Europe, both as an object and as a system of representation, was taken for granted and used as a reference point to interpret other sign carriers and systems of representations as well as to collect and organize the information gathered from members of culture with different sign carriers and systems of

²⁸ Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Toltecáyotl. Aspectos de la cultura náhuatl* (México City: UNAM, 1982); M. S. Edmonson and P. Andrews, eds., *Literatures. Supplement Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955).

²⁹ Jerome S. Bruner, "Going beyond the Information Given," *Beyond the Information Given*, 218–39 (New York: N. N. Norton, 1973); Eleanor Rosch, "Principle of Categorization," in E. Rosch and B. Lloyd, eds., *Cognition and Categorization*, 28–49 (New York: Erlbaum Associates, 1978); M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Vern W. McGee, trans., 60–102 (Austin: University of Texas, 1986); W. D. Mignolo, "Semiosis, Coherence and Universes of Meaning," in M. E. Conte, J. S. Petofi, and E. Sozer, eds., *Text and Discourse Connectedness*, 483–505 (Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 1989).

³⁰ Munro S. Edmonson and Patricia Andrews, *Literatures. Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Miguel León-Portilla, *Toltecáyotl. Aspectos de la cultura náhuatl*, 72–100 (México: UNAM, 1982).

³¹ Martine Loutfi, *Littérature et colonialisme* (Paris: Mouton, 1971); Michael Adas, "Machines as the Measure of Men," *Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, 133–198 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

representation attached to them.³² For instance, the ideology built around *amoxтли* and *vuh* in Mesoamerican cultures was suppressed by the ideology built around the book in Western cultures. The similarity that the book, *vuh*, and *amoxтли*—all terms which are derived from names which in Latin, Maya, and Náhuatl and which refer to the bark of different kinds of trees from which a solid surface for writing purposes was prepared—shared in the values and functions in their respective cultures was erased by the valorization of the Western book over the *amoxтли* and *vuh*.³³ However, missionaries were not in a position to distinguish the materiality of cultural artifacts and human interactions from the descriptions and the meaning attributed to them. The following two examples might help in understanding that the colonization not only took place at the level of materiality of cultures (for example, burning Amerindian books) but also at the level of description and attribution of meaning in which Amerindian descriptions of their own social practices and cultural artifacts were replaced by the Spaniards’.

The peninsular Franciscan in the Yucatan Peninsula, Diego de Landa, and the Mexican-born Franciscan, Diego Valadés (b. 1533), are two helpful examples in understanding the relevance of the alphabet in the colonization of Amerindian languages and the concept of the book in the colonization of Amerindian memories.³⁴ Two of the most well-known performances of Diego de Landa in the Yucatan Peninsula were burning the Maya’s written records (*vuh*) and his attempt to translate Mayan hieroglyphs into the letters of the Roman alphabet (see Plate 1). He was less bothered by written signs inscribed on stone, perhaps because for him writing is inscribed in books (or on manuscript paper) but not on the material surface of an animal skin or carved on stones, which was perhaps closer to design and sculpture. Although book burning did not only occur in the colonization of the New World, translating hieroglyphs into alphabetic units was one of the first efforts to colonize Amerindian languages and memories and followed the arrival of Pedro de Gante in Mexico and the beginning of the alphabetization campaign. Landa’s assumption that hieroglyphs were a form of alphabetic writing has been and still is taken for granted. I am not trying to discredit Landa’s perception of signs, which in the Maya system represented classes of sounds, but rather to

³² Manuel García Pelayo, “Las culturas del libro,” *Revista de Occidente*, 24–25 (1965), 46–69; T. C. Skeat, *Early Christian Book-Production: Papyri and Manuscripts*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, G. N. Lampe, ed., 54–79 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Johannes Pedersen, *The Arabic Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

³³ Ramón Arzápalo Marín, “The Indian Book in Colonial Yucatán,” and Walter D. Mignolo, “Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World,” in *Proceedings of the Conference “The Book in the Americas,”* M. Mathes and N. Fiering, eds. (Virginia University Press, forthcoming).

³⁴ Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1566), A. M. Tozzer trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941) and his *Diego Valadés, Rethorica Christiana* (1579) (Spanish translation. México: UNAM, 1989).

PLATE 2. Diego Valadés (*Rhetorica Christiana*, Perugia, 1579) followed Ludovico Dolce's example (*Dialogo nel qual si ragiona del modo de accrescere a conservar la memoria*, Venice, 1562) and adapted the Latin alphabet to images of the Mexica world that best fit the image of the letter. Thus, while in the Western culture a "C" reminds a person of a horn or a horse shoe, it is not clear—and Valadés does not mention it—what is the connection between the C and the bird he associates to it, replacing the horn and the horseshoe. What Valadés indicates, however, is that the prestige of the alphabet was suggested as a mnemonic technique to replace equally valid methods of memorization practiced with excellent results among the Mexica before the conquest.

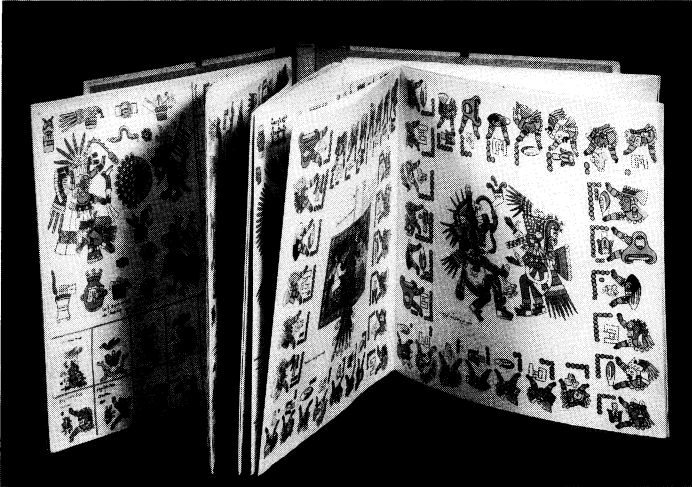
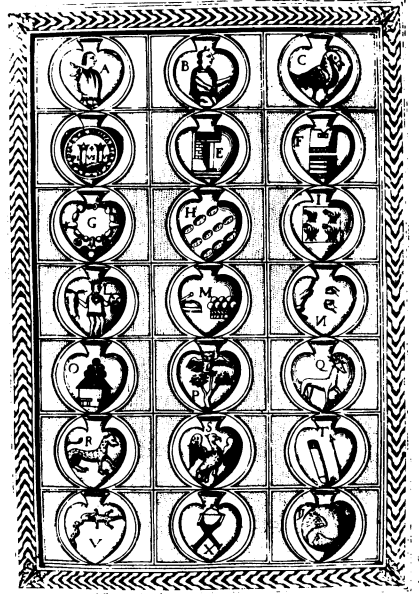


PLATE 3. This facsimile edition of the *Codex Borbonicus* shows the accordion form of Mexica "books." If Motolinias' classification of five kinds of books in ancient Mexico is followed, the *Borbonicus* belongs to two different kinds: the first part is devoted to the baptism of the children (*tonalamatl*, a calendar and religious almanac); the second part records the festivals of the 365-day native year (D. Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period. The Metropolitan School* [New Haven, 1959]). The emphasis on "books" was, however, a Spanish obsession, as the Mexica (as well as the Maya) not only wrote on objects similar to Western books but also on solid surfaces, such as stones or animal skins, and consequently that writing does not necessarily imply a book. The *Borbonicus* in the form we know it today is considered by some as a pre-conquest codex, although not all specialists in the field agree with this dating.

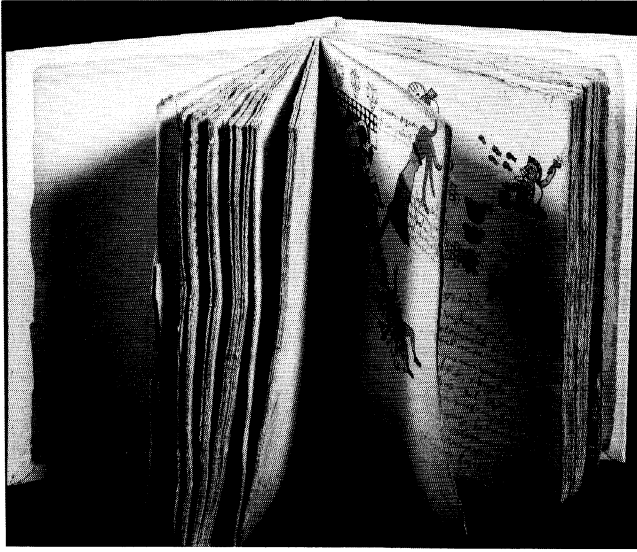


PLATE 4. The *Codex Tudela* is clearly post-conquest. Bound in the form of a Medieval Codex or Western book, it was written toward 1550 and shows the tension between Mexica pictography and Spanish alphabetic writing, with the latter used to describe the meaning of the former. This codex is a telling example that the Spanish system was replacing Mexica writing systems and sign carriers.



PLATE 5. One page of the *Florentine Codex*, a manuscript in three volumes (twelve books or chapters), in which the Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagún, organized all the information he gathered about Mexica culture and history from approximately 1558 to 1578. The page shows the similarities between Sahagún's report and Western Medieval manuscripts. Furthermore, Mexica knowledge was reorganized in Sahagún's impressive work following the model provided by early encyclopedic compilations, such as those by Pliny the Elder (first century) and the Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus (first half of the thirteenth century).

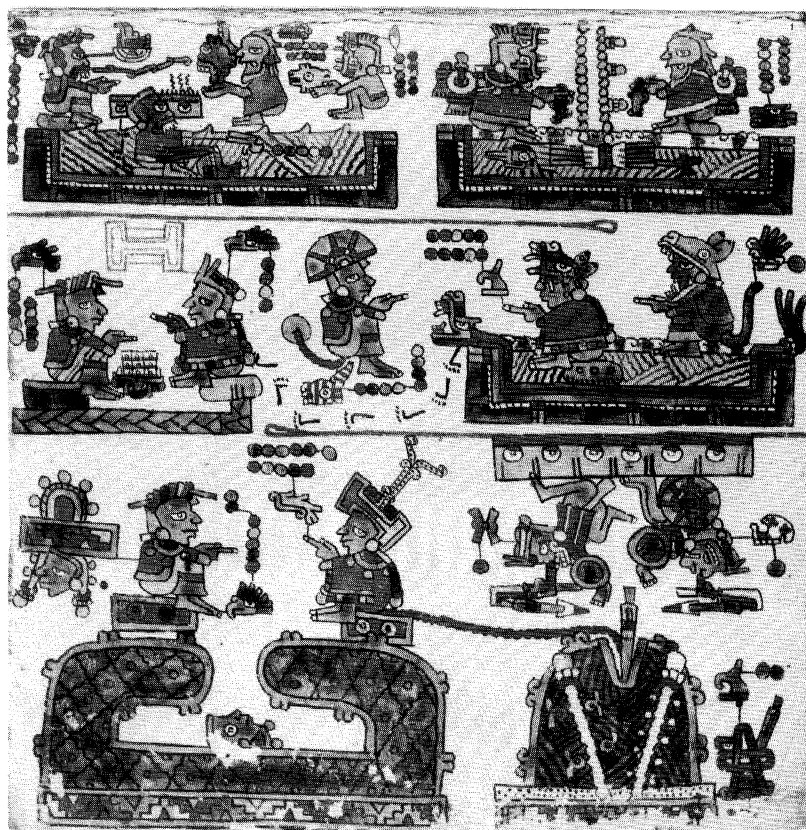


PLATE 6. The first “page” of the *Codex Selden*, a genealogical Mixtec codex. It is believed that codices of this kind, called in Mixtec *naandeye* or *tonindeje*, functioned as a script to remember what was told in an oral narrative (names of the person, birthdate, marriage and death, conquests, and so forth). The *Selden* should be “read” from bottom to top, in zig-zag fashion or *boustrophedon*, following the path indicated by the diacritical red lines. The first scene was described as follows: “In the day 2 House, of the year 4 (or 5) Reed, the Sun “1 Death” and the planet Venus, “1 Movement” descended from the sky and threw a dart which made an opening in the *Hill of Jade and Gold*; from that crevice was born the lord 11 Water” (Alfonso Caso, *Interpretacion del Codice Selden* (Sociedad Mexicana de Antropologia) [Mexico: 1964]). We should keep in mind that this written interpretation by a scholar from our time is a simulacrum of what could have been the oral narrative of a member of the Mixtec community “narrating” the story told in the painting.

underscore his conception of the history of writing. The very act of looking for correspondences between signs representing ideas and signs standing for classes of sounds seems to indicate not only a conception of writing which is clearly evolutionary but also the assumption that the best form of writing is to represent speech in letter form. The problem, however, is not with Landa's perspective but rather with the tenacity of those beliefs, which are often expressed today in the explicit assumption that any system of graphic signs which could be used as an alternative to oral discourse could be considered true writing.

The second example, an early version of the mnemonic technique for learning the alphabet assembled by Diego Valadés (1579), illustrates the agency of letters and books in the colonization of Mexican languages. This example, although less spectacular, has a dramatism similar to the one exemplified by Landa's axiom in the Yucatan Peninsula (Plate 2). The drama comes from the inability of Valadés, who was born in Mexico (in 1533) and educated in Spanish institutions, to perceive what the introduction of the alphabet and of renaissance rhetoric was doing to Amerindian cultures. Although his Christian rhetoric (1579) has been praised as the first to pay attention to the Mexican tradition and he is regarded as a patriotic example of a successful Mexican who published his book in Italy, his rhetoric did contribute to the Spanish colonization of Amerindian languages, a fact not often mentioned. In a chapter devoted to different forms of exercising memory (a common strategy among rhetoricians), Valadés developed a theory of Roman letters based on the sounds and their arbitrarily projected graphic image. In the first case, the images of the letters were formed by the sounds of the voice and were illustrated with proper names. For instance, A from Antonio; B from Bartolomé, and so forth. The obvious graphic nature of every letter was the image of the letter according to the figure it was supposed to resemble. Valadés developed a translation of the graphic images of the letters he found in Ludovico Dolce's treatise³⁵ about methods of increasing mnemonic capacities into figures common to the Aztec world (Plate 2). These were in place and actively used just a few decades before Valadés was born.

My goal in this article is not to measure the consequences of such a strategy when it is imposed on a person who has to exchange his oral mnemonic devices for graphic ones or when members of the colonized culture have to rearrange the flow of sound in their speech and accommodate themselves to the word as well as some twenty graphic signs.³⁶ I am more interested in exploring the philosophy of writing (at least in the first two generations) after

³⁵ *Dialogo nel qual si ragiona del modo de accrescere a conservar memoria* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito di Ferrari, 1562).

³⁶ For this process of transformation, see Serge Gruzinski, "Peinture et écriture," in *La colonisation de l'imaginaire. Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol, XVIe-XVIIe siècle*, 15-100 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

the spread of Western literacy and the act of writing the history of people who had been declared to be without history. In this regard two aspects deserve to be accentuated.

First, the colonization of written languages consisted precisely of an alternative perception and organization of speech and graphic signs which conflicted with or replaced those already in place. The outcome of this complex process would be the adaptation of the new writing and genres system by members of the colonized cultures (for example, Garcilaso de la Vega, in Perú; Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl in México); the use of alphabetic writing transgressing or ignoring the orthographic rules and subordinating the more familiar way of picture writing (for example, the exceptional case of Guaman Poma de Ayala, in Perú); and, finally, those texts which we cannot talk about either because they had not been written or because they are still buried in the archives and we do not yet know about them.

Second, writing is more likely to be successfully colonized than speech. Although all the forms of traditional Amerindian writings completely disappeared and were replaced by alphabetic writing, the colonization of speech was not equally successful. Even today hundreds of communities in Latin America still live according to the world view inherited from their pre-Columbian ancestors, and millions of people still speak Amerindian languages, bearing witness to the fact that the colonization of graphic languages (which are an extension of the hands) was more successful than the colonization of verbal languages (which are inscribed in the body).

The alphabet did not by chance become so naturally linked to the idea of the book that they were both part of a larger ideological system in which the possibility of writing in something not a manuscript codex or a printed book (for instance, writing in clay tablets, deer skin, or scroll) was either not considered or was regarded as an activity of the remote past. The complicity between the materiality of writing and the ideology of the book could be illustrated by the dialogue between the first twelve Franciscan friars arriving in México after the fall of Tenochtitlan (1523) and the representatives of the Aztec nobility. Toward the end of the sixteenth century the Franciscan, Gerónimo de Mendieta, offered a brief summary of this dialogue. After the friars informed the Aztec representatives of their goals and explained the Christian doctrine to them, the *principales* readily accepted what the friar told them. The *Coloquios y Doctrina Christiana* in Sahagún's version (1565) indicates that Mendieta gave an accurate report of what happened. However, when the text is read in the Náhuatl version or in recent translations offered in Spanish or in English, a totally different picture emerges. Much of the difference is related to the idea of writing and to the authority attributed to the Book by the Franciscan friars.³⁷

³⁷ Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta. *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* (1595; rpt., México: UNAM 1971); Bernardino de Sahagún, *Coloquios y Doctrina Christiana* (*The Coloquios of 1524*),

The dialogue, whose written pieces Sahagún collected and wrote in 1565, took place in 1524, perhaps over a period of several days or weeks. The temporal aspect of the scene of speaking is not clear in the written version. Roughly, the situation is reported as follows. After hearing the explanation of the Christian Doctrine, the Aztec principales asked the Franciscans whether they had to abandon their own gods and traditions. To the affirmative reply of the friars, the Aztecs asked for a reason. The friars answered that everything they needed to know was written in the Divine Book. This simple answer is indicative of the extent to which the Franciscan friars were prisoners of the tyranny of the alphabet and the idea of the book, for they had already forgotten the oral tradition of what they trusted as the Divine Book. Nor could they make sense of the answer provided by the Aztec principales about their own gods and semiotic authorities equivalent to the Christian Book.

Let me disclose some facts I have in mind at this point. Over forty years ago, Ernst Robert Curtius³⁸ called our attention to the number and the significance of the images that different cultures construct to represent their ideas about writing and about the book. He began his survey—as one would suspect—with the Greeks, noting that they did not have any idea of the sacredness of the book, as there is no privileged priestly cast of scribes. The well-known disparagement of writing in Plato's dialogue is a complementary example for understanding that the attitudes toward writing and the book in ancient Greece were not exactly as the Renaissance men of letters thought they were. It is also well-known, in fact, that in the last part of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates attempts to convince Phaedrus that writing is not an aid to memory and learning. On the contrary, Socrates argues, writing can only "awaken reminiscences" without replacing the true discourse lying in the psyche of the wise man which must be transmitted through oral interactions.

It should be emphasized that Socrates was mainly concerned with writing, as the very concept of the book we have today was totally alien to the Greeks. It should also be remembered that Socrates was mainly concerned with writing in its relationship to knowledge and its transmission but not to the book. The difficulties we have today in imagining such a situation are due to the fact that for us writing, knowledge, and book have become part of the same process and are seen as similar material objects used to store and transmit knowledge. However, when writing was still an activity performed on papyrus, without the shape of what later on in the second century of the Christian era would become the medieval codex, it would have been impossible for a lettered Greek to build around a roll of papyrus scratched on without punctuation the same idea built by medieval and renaissance intellectuals around

Miguel León-Portilla, ed. and trans. (1565; rpt., México: UNAM, 1986); Jorge Klor de Alva, trans., "The Aztec-Spanish Dialogues, 1524," *Alcheringa*, 4:2 (1980), 5–192.

³⁸ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, W. R. Trask, trans. (1948; rpt., Princeton, 1973).

an object made of bound paper, illuminated and arranged with increasing conventions and instructions for positioning the graphic signs on a page.

It is difficult today, as it was already for a lettered person in the sixteenth century, to remember that in Greece it was impossible to imagine knowledge or information organized in a single volume, instead of several rolls made of skin or of Egyptian papyrus. Whether the later divisions of a narrative (or book) into chapters (or books) derived from a set of rolls conforming to a thematic unit or roll is beyond our purpose here. However, if one thinks of the rich vocabulary associated with graphic semiotic interactions inherited from the Greeks and if one also remembers that the idea of the sacred book was alien to them, for they were more concerned with writing than with books, it could be concluded that the roll or *biblos* cannot be translated as book and made part of its history without imposing the current meaning of book upon *biblos*. Also, one cannot make *biblos* an antecedent of the book without understanding the meaning (or the idea) associated with that object. The ideas associated with *biblos* in ancient Greece were perhaps closer to the ideas associated with *amoxtli* in ancient Mexico (Plate 3). Spaniards disregarded this difference and translated both *biblos* and *amoxtli* as book. Nevertheless, although they were proud of placing themselves in the Greco-Roman tradition, they simultaneously destroyed the Mesoamerican *amoxtli* and *vuh*, which they believed were books written by the devil.³⁹

Certainly the destruction of Mesoamerican books because they were dictated by the devil and the use of the written Holy Book as a proof that Amerindians were wrong in their beliefs were just two ways in which we can relate writing, the Roman alphabet, and the book to the colonization of languages (Plate 4). Between the act of writing and the object called book as sign carrier and container of knowledge lay a third party: genres or discursive types. Historical narratives are neither the sign nor the book, just as writing is not only the act of inscribing graphic marks on solid surfaces⁴⁰ and speech is not only the production of sound waves. Speaking and writing imply the

³⁹ *Biblos* was the name used in Greece to designate the inner bark of a reed; Greeks called the reed, *pápyros*. It has been suggested that by the fifth century B.C. that *biblion* denoted not books but tabular manuals, notes on a single sheet, with basic indications for delivering an oral speech. See George A. Kennedy, "The Earliest Rhetorical Handbooks," *American Journal of Philology*, 80 (1959), 169–78.

⁴⁰ I am limiting my description of writing to the available knowledge of the time. The etymology of words indicating writing in various languages refers to an imagery related to scratching and, in Latin, to plowing. Latin also has an analogy between text and textile which is apt when looking at the Andean quipu as a kind of writing. Of course, when the materiality of social practices changes, the conceptualization attached to them also changes. Data banks, computers, word processors, and the like are forcing us to review our concepts of library, books, and writing. See, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo, "Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World," *The Book in The Americas*, N. Fiering and M. Mathes, eds. (Charlottesville: forthcoming); Mark Poster, "Foucault and Data Bases," *Discourse: Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 12:2 (1990), 110–27.

production of sound waves and graphic marks according to a set of rules and cognitive frames. The first have been called grammars and the second, genres. Spaniards not only wrote grammars for native Amerindian languages, but they also used their own discursive genres to write down the Amerindian memories and their own books (Plate 5) to replace Amerindian *amoxli* and *vuh* (Plate 6).

Where does the question of writing history as a discursive genre fit into the previous scenario? The Renaissance philosophy of language was not just concerned with writing. It was also concerned with speech (when the question was the origin and the diversity of languages); with the syntactic and logic structure of the sentence (when the issues were matters of grammar and logic); and with the structure of discourse (when the question was the disciplines of the trivium and, later, the inclusion of *poetica* and *historica* in the realm of *grammar*, *rhetorica*, and *dialectica* or logic). Writing began to be an issue with the Renaissance celebration of the letter⁴¹ and with the encounter between cultures with different writing systems. Thus, when the Jesuit, José de Acosta, worked in Perú toward the end of the sixteenth century and wrote a letter to ask his colleague, Antonio Tovar, in México how was it possible that the Indians could have history if they did not have writing (he meant alphabetic writing) and how was it possible that they could speak with such admirable figures of speech if they did not have rhetoric, Acosta was not implying that the lack of letters meant a lack of intelligence (for Acosta was not a Franciscan and was not on the side of de Gante). He believed, however, in the chain of writing systems within a hierarchy of human cultures according to their written achievements.⁴²

Between the early years of the sixteenth century, in which de Gante equated the lack of letters with a lack of enlightenment, and the final years of the same century, when Acosta did not deny the Amerindians' intelligence (although he still did not regard them as equals), the connections between the lack of letters and barbarism was articulated in the mid-sixteenth century by the Dominican, Bartolomé de las Casas, in his *Apologética historia sumaria*.⁴³ According to

⁴¹ See Antonio de Nebrija, *Introductiones latinae* (Salamanca, 1481); *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (Salamanca, 1482); *Reglas de orthografía en la lengua castellana* (Alcalá de Henares, 1517); Walter D. Mignolo, "Nebrija in the New World: The Questions of the Letter, the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition, and the Colonization of the Native Languages," *L'Homme* (Paris, October 1992).

⁴² There is enough evidence to think that language was always one element upon which communities built a sense of identity by distinguishing themselves from the others who did not speak their language well. In ancient México, as well as in ancient Greece, this was certainly the case. The difference between ancient México and Greece, on the one hand, and the European renaissance, on the other, is that the former put the accent on speech, while the latter on writing.

⁴³ Acosta's letter and Tovar's answer have been reprinted by Joaquín García Icazbalceta, in *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Primer Obispo y Arzobispo de México*, vol. 2: 263–7 (México: Andrade and Morales, 1881); the fourth kind of barbarians were defined by Las Casas in the epilogue of his *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (1555?; rpt., México: UNAM, 1967).

Las Casas, the term barbarian referred to three different cultural types: The first alluded to human beings who had lost control of themselves, their minds overwhelmed by their passion; the second, to those who used a certain type of language; and the third, to those who were literally barbarians because of the regions they inhabited and because they were not governed by laws and did not have justice. I am obviously interested in the second type of barbarians, in which Adam's primordial language and Babel's confusion of tongues were used this time not to explain the origin of language or to justify the most perfect (Valla's Latin and Nebrija's Castilian) but to distinguish them from those who were civilized. We should ponder both de Gante's dictum and Acosta's question, in relation to las Casas' definition.

It is not surprising that language was, on the one hand, equated with speech or tongues (in Romance Languages *lingua*, *lengua*, *linguaggio*, *lenguaje*, *langue*, *language*) and, on the other, was recognized as one (if not the) specific feature that distinguished human beings from animals and was instrumental in developing and in organizing social life. Such beliefs were understandable, not necessarily because the influence of platonic philosophy of language discredited writing, but because that philosophy was based on the experience of a civilization whose oral means of learning was threatened by the introduction of writing.⁴⁴ Although speech was linked to the differences between human beings and animals and this link was fundamental to the construction of the idea of *humanes*, writing was so recent for Socrates (just as it is still so recent in the history of human civilizations, even now), that in Greece the very idea of language was still associated with speech and not with writing. The ideological shift from the spoken to the written in the construction of knowledge and the transmission of learning took a definitive shape during the European Renaissance and played a fundamental role in constructing the difference this time not between human and non-human but, rather, between the barbarians and those who were civilized. In las Casas's world, all knowledge (*scientia*) was textually dependent. It was therefore understandable that he and his sixteenth-century fellows employed a distinction which conflated knowledge and the use of the letters of the alphabet to distinguish between barbarian and civilized people, while ancient Greeks and ancient Mexicans distinguished barbarians by their way of speaking, not by their way of writing. Las Casas and his fellows also established the meaning of *letrados* (the lettered ones) as a social role attached to and representing learning.⁴⁵ The

⁴⁴ Erick Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Boston: Havelock Press, 1963), and his *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Jacques Derrida's grammatological reflections (*De la grammatologie* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967]), which are difficult to ignore without alarming the erudites in critical theory, did not take into account the tension and conflict between the oral and the written in Plato's philosophy of language or the inversion of Platonic philosophy by the Renaissance philosophy of language.

⁴⁵ According to Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process* [1968, in German] (New York: Urizen Books, 1978, in English), "The concept of *civilité* acquired its meaning for Western society at a

ability to create a system of writing, as well as the access to the power and knowledge that such a system conferred, was the ultimate token of the superiority of civilized over barbarian people.⁴⁶

The preceding discussion should contribute to our understanding of why historians of the Indies of the first century showed such a strong concern for the ways by which the Amerindians preserved their memories. This concern was not of course neutral but was formulated by those who, in the act of framing the question, "How can the Amerindians have history if they do not have writing," were describing the very idea of the activity they were performing: to write history as a linear narrative in which the chain of words (a concept difficult to imagine in a nonalphabetic writing system) was one and the same with the chain of events.⁴⁷

Such an idea of history would have been very difficult to understand for people who were not acquainted with alphabetic writing and did not know exactly how a flow of sounds could be broken up into words, much less how to relate sequences of words with sequences of events. The *tlamatinime*, for instance, who were used to reading (or looking at paintings, as far as the Mexica conceptualization goes) from bottom to top and in a boustrophedon pattern, may have had some difficulties in translating the relationships between words and events, because they departed from their own experience of telling stories by looking at the paintings of pictographic written codices. The current Western concept of literacy, generally defined as the capacity to read and write, makes one forget that the concept of reading associated with alphabetic writing is not necessarily applicable to nonalphabetic systems of

time when chivalrous society and the unity of the Catholic church were disintegrating. It is the incarnation of a society which, as a specific stage in the formation of Western manners or 'civilization,' was no less important than the feudal society before it. The concept of civilité, too, is an expression and symbol of a social formation embracing the most diverse nationalities, in which, as in the Church, a common language is spoken, first Italian and then increasingly French. These languages take over the function earlier performed by Latin. They manifest the unity of Europe and at the same time the new social formation which forms its backbone, court society" (vol. 1, p. 53). The New World experience brought not only speech but also writing into the dividing line between those who were either civilized or barbarian.

⁴⁶ For the semantic field associated with *litteratus/illiteratus* in the Middle Ages, see Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066–1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); in the Spanish renaissance, Luis Gil Fernández, *Panorama Social del Humanismo Español (1500–1800)* (Madrid: Alambra, 1981); Aron Gurevich, "Popular Culture and Medieval Latin Literature from Caesarius of Arles to Caesarius of Heisterbach," *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, 1–59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁷ When discussing the conditions of truthfulness, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theoretician of historiography accentuated the need to match the truth of the narrative with the truth of the things (or events) themselves. From the belief that the truth is both in the narrative and in the events, it followed that history was made of both words and events. See W. D. Mignolo, "El metatexto historiográfico y la historiografía Indiana," *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1981), 359–402, and his "Historia, relaciones y *tlatollótl*: los *Preceptos historiales* de Fuentes y Guzman y las Historias de Indias," *Filologia*, 11:2 (1986), 153–78. For a theoretical discussion about the conventions of fictionality and truthfulness and their relation with narrative genres and discursive configurations, see W. D. Mignolo, "Dominios borrosos y dominios teóricos: ensayo de elucidación conceptual," *Filologia*, XX (1985), 20–40.

interactions. The verb to read did not exist in Náhuatl. Translating *Amoxitóa* as “reading a book,” might allow it to be understood by a literate Western person, but that translation does not render its actual meaning. *Amoxitóa* is a compound word whose roots are *amoxtli*, a tree on the lake of Mexico, and by extension, the bark of a tree on which graphic marks were inscribed; and *toa*, which means to narrate or to tell a story. One can surmise that those who were trained to read the books would be looking at the picture while telling the story orally. Thus, the main issue here is that there are different ways of discerning (one meaning of the verb to read) and telling stories that report the outcome of the discerning act.

I understand that inverting the process of conceiving history would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the Spaniards. However, they and not the Mexican intelligentsia posed the question. Humanism and renaissance were concepts literally from a different history, which is why the Spaniards either complained about the lack of coherence in Amerindian oral narratives or simply ignored the patterns in which the Amerindians cast their own. The philosophy of language with which missionaries and men of letters were armed extended itself from grammar to complex genres and allowed them to conclude that if Amerindians did not have similar kinds of writing and a similar philosophy of language, they would not be able to produce clear accounts of their own past: History was the way to do it, and history was a matter of alphabetic written narratives. This conclusion was a sufficient condition for the missionaries and men of letters to become the self-appointed chroniclers the Amerindians apparently did not have.⁴⁸

Let me offer some specific examples to support the previous discussion and to illustrate the natural link, among European intellectuals, of letters, history and books. In the beginning of his book, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (1535),⁴⁹ Oviedo emphasized that from the moment of his arrival in the Indies he was concerned with finding out how the Indians recalled their origins and the things (*las cosas*) of their ancestors. He observed that on the island of Santo Domingo, their songs, called *areytos*, constituted their books or memories. Almost a century later, the Inka, Garcilaso de la Vega, whose work reflects the tension between the organization and transmission of the culture of his ancestors and the ideas of writing and of the book of the European Renaissance, asked his uncle about his knowledge of the origin of

⁴⁸ The European concepts of historiographical writing in connection with the history of the Indies were laid out in Walter D. Mignolo, “El metatexto historiográfico y la historiografía indiana,” *Modern Language Notes*, 96 (1981), 358–402; for Spanish historiography of the period, see S. Montero Díaz, “La doctrina de la Historia en los tratadistas españoles del siglo de Oro,” *Hispania*, 4 (1941), 3–39; in Italy, see E. Maffei, *I trattati dell’ arte storica dal Rinascimento al secolo XVII* (Napoles, 1897), and Giorgio Spini, “I trattatisti dell’ arte storica nella Contrariforma italiana,” *Contributi alla storia del Concilio di Trento e della Contrariforma* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1948).

⁴⁹ Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (1535), Book I, ch. 1.

the Inka kings.⁵⁰ Garcilaso asked, specifically, how the Inkas could remember past events if they did not have writing. Garcilaso further specified his own question by telling his uncle that in Castile, as well as other nearby nations, there were Divine as well as human histories and, consequently, Castilians knew how many years had passed since God created Heaven and Hell: They knew everything about the transformations of one empire into another and about their own kingdoms. They knew all this, concluded Garcilaso, because they had books. The question was finally formulated more or less as follows: Since you (the Inkas) do not have books, what memories do you have of your past? A beautiful example, indeed, of diatopical hermeneutics in which the narrative first person avoids identifying itself with either they or you. The identification occurs, however, not in the pronominal form but in the natural complicity between the object (the book) and the actions (recording the past).

A few decades before Garcilaso, Acosta stepped forward to take a position in the debate as to whether the Amerindian lacked intelligence. He supported his persuasive arguments that Amerindians were intelligent human beings with examples of what the Amerindians had achieved. One of his primary examples was the Mexican calendar and their complex and sophisticated ways of keeping time records. However, in the sixth book of his *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590),⁵¹ Acosta changed direction and instead began to talk about what the Mexicans lacked. It is not surprising that the first thing he mentioned was the fact that nobody had discovered that “the Indians make use of letters.” In the sixth through eleventh chapters of this book, Acosta developed a theory of writing based on a philosophy of language which he freely admitted was influenced by Aristotle.

Acosta believed that letters were invented to signify the words we pronounce and that words are immediate signals of the concepts and thoughts of man (he was, of course, referring to human beings). Both letters and voice were created in order to understand things: voice for those who could communicate directly in the same space; letters for those who could not be present and those who, in the future, would be able to read what had been written. Acosta emphasized that signals or signs produced to signify other than words could not truly be called letters even though they could be written: A painted image of the sun is not a cluster of written letters depicting the sun but a painting. Based on this assumption, Acosta made two inferences: first, man (human beings) has three different ways of recording memories: by letters and by writing (whose primary examples are the Greeks, Latins and Hebrews) and by painting (whose primary examples Acosta found in almost every known civilization) and by ciphers and characters; second, none of the civilizations of the Indies used letters but did employ both images and figures.

⁵⁰ De la Vega, *Comentarios reales de los Incas* (1609), I, XV.

⁵¹ Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590), Book VI.

It was only natural that Tovar's report about the ways the Aztecs kept memories of their past and on their elegant ways of speaking surprised Acosta. This is the context in which Acosta's question to Tovar runs parallel to Garcilaso's question to his uncle: How could the Indians, asked Acosta, preserve their memories of so many varied things for such a long time without writing (by which he meant alphabetic writing)? How could they, insisted Acosta, have such wonderful speeches ("arenga y oraciones") if they did not have rhetoric (by which he meant the set or written norms which governed oral discourse)? Tovar, who was in Mexico and familiar with the art of memory practiced by the Aztecs, attempted an explanation of how both remembering the past and remembering long sentences could have worked without the help of letters. He agreed, however, with Acosta's concerns about the Aztecs' lack of writing. In his letter to Acosta, Tovar said that even if they had different types of figures and characters which they used to write things ("escribir las cosas"), their figures and characters are not as sufficient as our writing. Tovar went on to say that Mexicans had figures and hieroglyphs by means of which they painted things. And for those things they could not paint, because they did not have an image, they combined different characters to convey as much as they could or wanted to. From what we know today about Náhuatl writing, Tovar seems to refer to pictographic representation (of things, persons, gods, etc.) and ideographical glyphs (representing metaphysical concepts, such as movement, day, night, and so forth). But, of course, this was not enough to be called writing.⁵²

The renaissance theory of writing held by Spanish men of letters and its role in shaping historiographical practices in the New World should become clear from these examples. Its application to Amerindian culture and its connection

⁵² The question, again, is what should be called writing; and, further, whether "writing" in the past and in non-Western cultures should be called that which resembles what Westerners understand by writing, as in the opinion, for instance, of Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982). We could construe a theoretical definition or description of acceptance for writing any kind of graphic system which establish some kind of link with speech (Piotr Michalowski, "Early Mesopotamian Communicative Systems: Art, Literature, and Writing," *Investigating Artistic Environments in the Ancient Near East*, Ann C. Gunter, ed., 53–69 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1990), although such a definition may not tell us much about how people conceived graphic interactions in different times and cultures. The etymology of writing, in several languages, is related to carving. In Greek *gráfein* meant "to carve." In Latin *scribere* indicated a physical action of inscribing graphic marks in solid surfaces and was metaphorically related to plowing. In Mesoamerica, however, the words referring to writing underlined the colors of the inks used and, therefore, the accent was on painting: *tlacuilo*, in Náhuatl, referred to the scribe and it meant, literally, "behind the painting" (*tlā* = behind and *cuilō* = painting). For a description of Mesoamerican writing systems, see Hans Prem and Berthold Riese, "Autochthonous American Writing Systems: The Aztec and Maya Examples," in F. Coulmas and K. Ehlich, eds., *Writing in Focus* (New York: Mouton, 1983). We could certainly bring J. Derrida into the discussion, but it would take us too far to discuss the underlying presupposition of alphabetic writing in his discussion. After all, in his fundamental work on the subject (*De la grammatologie* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967]), Derrida remained within the confines of the Greco-Roman tradition of alphabetic writing.

with their philosophy of history elicited Acosta's typology of writing and the complicity between writing and history. The marriage between history and alphabetical writing meant that anybody could keep records of the past, but history could only be written with letters. What was the foundation for this conception of writing history? What was the philosophy of history that made such a connection with writing? Within the legacy of Imperial Rome, works such as the *Ad Herennium*, *De Oratore*, and *Institutione Oratoria* were commonly known as the basic rhetorical treatises for any humanistic education. They imposed and transmitted the idea that history is narration and that narration is the central part of constructing a text, the *dispositio*. It is also a well-known fact that Quintilian in the *Institutione Oratoria* distinguished three kinds of narrations: *fabula*, a tragic and epic form which was the furthest removed from truth; *argumentum*, a feigned narrative applied to comedy; and, finally, *historia*, a narrative considered to be the true account of past events.⁵³ The complicity between history and alphabetic writing comes from a culture whose learned members were able to write sophisticated treatises (rhetoric) about oral discourses (oratory). They laid the groundwork for the conception of the writing of history in terms of the fundamentals of oratorical discourses, all of which was a by-product of the imposition and growing relevance of alphabetic writing as the main learning device. Later, the works of Cicero and Quintilian, as basic treatises of humanistic education, shaped the minds of those who would write histories of the New World.⁵⁴

THE DISCONTINUITY OF THE CLASSICAL TRADITION: OCCIDENTALIZATION AND RESISTING COMMUNITIES

A turning point took place when the same treatises were also employed in the New World to educate the native elites.⁵⁵ The history of education in the New World shows that the colonization of languages followed the paths at the level of cultural literacy.⁵⁶ The few Amerindians educated in the New World and in

⁵³ Quintilian, *Institutione Oratoria*, Book II, ch. V, in Quintilian, *Institution oratoire*, text établi et traduit par J. Cousin (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977).

⁵⁴ Ignacio Osorio Romero, *Colegios y profesores Jesuitas que enseñaron Latin en Nueva España (1521–1767)* (México: UNAM, 1979); *Tópicos sobre Cicerón en México* (México: UNAM, 1976); *La enseñanza del Latín a los indios* (México: UNAM, 1990).

⁵⁵ See Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpurú, *Historia de la educación en la época colonial. El mundo indígena* (México: El Colegio de México, 1990). Ignacio Osorio Romero, *La enseñanza del latín a los indios* (México: UNAM, 1990).

⁵⁶ There is another dimension of literacy and resistance illustrated by the documentation related to testaments, land litigations, and other forms of legal disputes which would cause a long detour in my argument if integrated into it (see, however, F. Karttunen, "Náhuatl literacy," G. A. Collier, R. Rosaldo, and J. D. Wirth, eds., *The Inca and Aztec States: 1400–1800* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); A. Anderson, F. Berdan, and J. Lockhart, *Beyond the Codices. The Nahua View of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1976). I am limiting my examples to the philosophy of writing (and therefore to the sphere of high culture) and the frame that it provided for writing grammars of Amerindian languages and histories of Amerindian cultures, rather than to the consequences manifested in particular cases in which Spanish gram-

Spanish Colleges (such as Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco) integrated the renaissance philosophy of language and historiographical conceptions in their writing of Amerindian history (for example, Ixtlilxóchitl, Tezozómoc, Muñón Chimalpaín) and had to negotiate the conflict between the forces of their own traditions (both in the content of their memories as well as in their ways of remembering and transmitting them) with the rhetorical (for example, the trivium) education they received in Castilian institutions. The tension between the past which Amerindian historians needed to remember, fix, and transmit conflicted with the models of writing and writing history which used a tradition which was not their own. These tensions were manifested in historical writings in the native languages: Chimalpaín or Tezozómoc writing in Náhuatl; Ixtlilxóchitl writing in Spanish while in México; Garcilaso de la Vega writing in Spanish while in Spain after leaving Perú, when he was sixteen years old; Guaman Poma de Ayala writing in a broken Spanish and using drawings more than alphabetic writing, when addressing Philip III from the Viceroyalty of Perú.⁵⁷ The variations between the language in which writing is performed and the place of the performance sketch the scene of writing for those few Amerindians who could use the pen and the ink and whose written compositions would eventually reach the printing press. Of all the names just mentioned, only Garcilaso de la Vega was able to see the writing under his name in printed form. The rest had a limited circulation in manuscript form and were printed between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The effort to colonize Amerindian languages and Amerindian memories required the introduction of a tool (alphabetic writing) and of discursive frames (renaissance system of genres). However, the spread of Western literacy did not develop as smoothly as the first educators tended to believe. Western systems of writing and discursive genres were adapted and used by the Amerindians to sustain their own cultural traditions. Alternative histories, either collective enterprises, such as the *Popol Vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam* (both written down toward the mid-sixteenth century) in the Mayan Peninsula, or individual enterprises, such as Muñón Chimalpaín or Ixtlilxóchitl in México (both written in the first decades of the seventeenth century), punctuate, on the one hand, the plurilingual and multicultural character

marians and historians could have been transformed by intercultural experiences. At the same time, I am limiting my examples of resistance to the sphere of interactions framed by members and representatives of Spanish literate culture. I hope that my argument does not convince the reader that I am celebrating, while I also hope the reader will understand that critical examination of phenomena in high culture is not less relevant than exploring popular ones.

⁵⁷ See the masterful summary by Enrique Florescano, "La reconstrucción histórica elaborada por la nobleza indígena y sus descendientes mestizos," *La memoria y el olvido. Segundo Simposio de Historia de las Mentalidades*, 11–20 (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1985), and Andrés Lira González, "Letrados y analfabetas en los pueblos de Indios de la ciudad de México: la historia como alegato para sobrevivir en la sociedad política," *La memoria y el olvido*, 61–74.

of colonial situations and, on the other, illustrate how such written practices collided with the Renaissance philosophy of language and writing held by missionaries and men of letters. It is in this coalition that the discontinuity of the classical tradition can be located and the fractured symbolic world of colonial situations analyzed.⁵⁸

Open resistance or resistance through adaptation was the counterpart of the colonization of language and memories, for not every step taken toward the alphabetization of the natives resulted in the desired effects. Three examples illustrate the unexpected consequences (from the missionaries' perspective) of literacy and the discontinuity of the classical tradition: the one reported by Mendieta (*Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, 1597) took place in México; the second, reported by Fray Francisco Ximenez, happened in the Yucatan Peninsula; the third, in colonial Perú, compares Garcilaso de la Vega (son of an Inka mother and a Castilian father who lived in Spain since he was sixteen) with Guaman Poma de Ayala (an Inka intellectual who never left Perú), both intellectually active between approximately 1580 and 1615.

At the very beginning of the literacy campaign in México, a few years after the arrival of the twelve Franciscan friars and their dialogue with the Aztec principales mentioned previously, Pedro de Gante, a key figure in the education of the Amerindians, reported on the actions taken and the efforts made by the Franciscan friars when they arrived at Mexico with the mission of converting the barbarians to Christianity. De Gante's letter, addressed to Philip II during 1558, more than thirty years later, underscored the friars' efforts to learn the native languages and commented on the difficulties involved in the task, since the natives were "people without writing, without letters, without written characters and without any kind of enlightenment." Values, as we know, support actions and orient strategies. Pedro de Gante also reported in detail how they proceeded in order to transmit the "letter" to those who did not possess it:

All that time approximately one thousand children were gathered together, and we kept them locked up day and night in our house, and they were forbidden any conversation with their fathers and even less with their mothers, with the only exception of those who served them and brought them food; and the reason for this was so that they might neglect their excessive idolatries and their excessive sacrifices, from which the devil had secured countless souls.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ European intellectuals and political leaders are becoming aware of the challenge of a multiethnic world to the classical tradition. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, in her Burgher speech, invoked the common experience rooted in the European classical tradition and celebrated the story of how European explored, colonized, and (without apologies) civilized much of the world, as a venture of talent, skill, and courage (quoted by Yasmin Alibhai in "Community Whitewash," *The Guardian*, January 23, 1989). Lucy R. Lippard provides a telling example of the perpetuation of fractured symbolic worlds in colonial situations in her *Mixed Blessings. New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

⁵⁹ Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México. Códice Franciscano. Siglo XVI* (México: Porrúa Hnos., 1941), 204.

The paragraph shows that alphabetic letters were not instilled without violence. The violence, however, was not located in the act of assembling and incarcerating the youngsters day and night but, rather, in the act of forbidding the children conversations with their parents, particularly with their mothers. In a primarily oral society, in which virtually all knowledge is transmitted by means of conversation, the preservation of oral contact was contradictory to the effort to teach how to read and write. Thus, forbidding conversations between the children and their mothers meant, basically, depriving them of the living culture imbedded in their language and preserved and transmitted through speech. The colonization of language took place at several levels. At one level was the introduction of the letter: not only the skill of reading and writing but of reading and writing the text written by those who were teaching how to read and write. The philosophy of language underlying the missionaries' belief was prompted by the connections they perceived between the lack of letters and the lack of enlightenment. Consequently, in the chain of writing that the Renaissance men of letters fabricated for themselves, alphabetical writing was, on the one hand, the most perfect of them all and superior to Chinese and Mesoamerican writing systems; and, on the other, it was related to the construction of the other as barbarian. In this picture, the lack of letters was a condition sufficient to equate the illiterate with the uncivilized or barbarian.

Mendieta's early history of the Franciscan in Mexico expands on Pedro de Gante's anecdote. According to de Gante's letter to Philip II, not all the children said to have been locked up in the monasteries were from noble families. The Mexica noble families naturally had no reason to trust the friars' intentions and motives. Thus, instead of sending their own children, they sent the children of their vassals. Mendieta made a point of reporting that those who were dishonest with the friars suffered consequences, for as the vassals learned how to read and write they ended up overruling their own superiors ("aquellos hijos de gente plebeya siendo alli doctrinado en la ley de Dios y en saber leer y escribir, salieron hombres habiles, y vinieron despues a ser alcaldes y gobernadores, y mandar a sus senores" [III:xv]). Resistance was the natural reaction of Amerindian communities, although Spanish historians presented a rosy picture of easy conversion. The process also resulted in the discontinuity of the classical tradition, for the Greco-Roman legacy was either rejected or transformed and adapted to the Amerindian traditions. This was illustrated in the well-known *Codice Badianus*, an Amerindian herbal book, written for medicinal purposes in Náhuatl and translated into Latin, toward 1550, by two Mexicans from the Colegio Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco.⁶⁰ The coexistence of Náhuatl with Latin implied, at the same time, the coexistence of classical Latin with the Amerindian medical legacy.

⁶⁰ The Franciscans founded the Colegio Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in 1536 and devoted it to the education of the young and noble Mexica.

The native books from the Yucatan Peninsula, such as the several *Books of Chilam Balam* or the *Popol Vuh* from the highlands of Guatemala, among others, could be explained within the context of unexpected consequences.⁶¹ There is enough evidence to believe that the former, which were written in the Yucatec language and in European script, were transcriptions in alphabetic writings of the old hieroglyphic (or painted) codices. Historians of the Yucatan Peninsula⁶² had reactions to native writing systems and books similar to those of the historians of the Aztec civilization. They reported, for instance, that the natives would read from these books in their assembly: Some were read to the rhythm of the drums; others were sung; and still others were enacted. There is also evidence that these books as we know them today were not compiled before the seventeenth or the eighteenth centuries. Consequently, what today is considered an encyclopedia or mixture of genres presumably existed before compilation in a single unit as a diversity of genres common to pictographic writing (bookkeeping, time reckoning) without parallel in oral genres. The colonization of genres in this case was not successful. As time went on, the same European script that the friars were so eager to transmit for more effective Christianizing of the natives was used by them to stabilize their past; to adapt themselves to the present; to transmit their own traditions to future generations; and, in sum, to resist the colonization of language and memory.⁶³ Arzápalo Marín advanced the hypothesis that the *Books of Chilam Balam* had been compiled as an adaptation and transformation of "reportorio de los tiempos," a general and encyclopedic compilation of miscellaneous knowledge, very popular in European renaissance and well known in the viceroyalty of New Spain.⁶⁴ Examples, such as the *Popol Vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam*, have always been problematic for historians of Latin American ideas and culture. Normally, they are aligned in the history of the pre-Columbian New World. This allows for a healthy preservation of the classical tradition, as they occupy a distinguished place before the intro-

⁶¹ Mercedes de la Garza, "Prólogo," *Literatura Maya* (Caracas, 1980); Munro S. Edmonson and Victoria Bricker, "Yucatecan Maya Literature," in *Literatures. Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 44–63 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

⁶² Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (circa 1566); Sanchez de Aguilar, "Informe contra idolorum cultores del obispado de Yucatán" (1639), *Anales* I:6 (1892), 13–122; Avendaño y Loyola, "Relación de las dos entradas que hize a la conversión de los gentiles ytzaes y ceachés" (Chicago, Manuscript at the Newberry Library, 1696); Diego López Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatán* (1688) (Campeche, 1954).

⁶³ Alfred Tozzer, *Maya Grammar with Bibliography and Appraisal of the Works Noted* (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, 1921), vol. ix; Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1933); Mercedes de la Garza, ed., *Literatura Maya* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980); Dennis Tedlock, trans., "Introduction" and "Commentary," *Popol Vuh. The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, 23–66 (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1985). Adrián Chávez, trans., *Pop Wuj. Libro Del Tiempo. Poema Mito-Historico Ki-che* [in Spanish] (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1987).

⁶⁴ "The Indian Book in Colonial Yucatan," *The Book in the Americas*, N. Fiering and M. Mathes, eds. (Charlottesville, forthcoming).

duction of the Greco-Roman legacy. However, as we have seen, these books are not pre-Columbian but colonial; and as such, their very fractured existence illustrates, once again, acts of resistance and the discontinuity of the classical tradition in the process of spreading Western literacy.

Finally, the recently published narrative of Rigoberta Menchú bears witness that acts of resistance and the discontinuity of the classical tradition are more than curious examples of a distant past. Her recent narrative of the life and deeds of a Quiche community is a clear example of the unwritten history of resistance and the continuing coexistence of the Western legacy with Amerindian traditions. Education, as illustrated by the example of Pedro de Gante mentioned above, is a case in point. The foundation of schools, colleges, and universities through which the process of Occidentalization was anchored was not enough to eradicate the non-Western traditions of Amerindian communities. In her recent narrative, Rigoberta reports that there are several moments, in raising a child, in which the adults talk to him or her about the importance of their tradition. Here is Menchú's report of the day the child turns ten years old:

They [the elders] tell them [the children] that they [the children] will be young men and women and that one day they will be fathers and mothers. This is actually when they tell the child that he must never abuse his dignity, in the same way his ancestors never abused their dignity. It's also when they remind them that our ancestors were dishonored by the White Man, by colonization. But they don't tell them the way that it is written down in books, because the majority of Indians can't read or write, and don't even know that they have their own texts. No, they learn it through oral recommendations, the way it has been handed down through the generations. They are told the Spaniards dishonored our ancestors' finest sons, and the most humble of them. And it is to honor these humble people that we must keep our secrets. And no-one except we Indians must know.⁶⁵

Today, narratives such as Rigoberta Menchú's help us understand similar instances of the past. In colonial Perú, Garcilaso de la Vega was the perfect example of the adaptation to Western literacy (in order to criticize it); but Guaman Poma epitomizes the use of alphabetic writing in order to resist the literacy of the colonizer.⁶⁶ In fact, although Garcilaso was able to write as a Castilian native speaker, to learn and apply European conceptualization of writing history, and to adjust himself to the social role corresponding to writing activities (that is, as a letrado), Guaman Poma resisted every single instance of integration or adaptation. One result was that Garcilaso quickly

⁶⁵ Rigoberta Menchú and Burgos Debray, *I Rigoberta Menchú . . . an Indian Woman from Guatemala*, 13 (London: Verso, 1984).

⁶⁶ José Rabasa, "Porque soy indio . . .," in *Loci of Enunciations and Imaginary Constructions: Cultural Studies in/about Latin America* (Special issue of *Poetics Today*), W. D. Mignolo, ed. (forthcoming). Roberto González-Echevarría, "The Law of the Letter: Garcilaso's *Comentarios* and the Origin of Latin American Narrative," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 1:1 (1987), 107–31; Rolena Adorno, *Guaman Poma. Writing and Resistance in Colonial Perú* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

became the representative voice of the Inkas, but Guaman Poma was forgotten or registered in the history of historiography as a moment of shame for the Castilian language and culture. In his *coronica* to King Philip III, Guaman Poma expressed his acute dissatisfaction through a counter-proposal for the administration and government of Perú that used alphabetical writing together with pictorial representation. He was able to commingle the literacy of his own ancestors with Western literacy, to make himself understood by his others without losing his own identity. Although Guaman Poma's writing illustrates resistance to colonization, his exclusion from the history of Latin American culture during at least four and a half centuries is an apparent example of colonization of writing and of genres. Perhaps the "chronicles of the impossible"⁶⁷ are simultaneously narratives of resistance. All these are telling examples, if not proof, of the discontinuity of the classical tradition during the process of colonization. They are all rooted in the tensions between a Renaissance philosophy of writing underlying the actions taken by Spanish educators and the Amerindian resistance to the assimilation of Western semiotic practices. From the early Franciscan experience reported by Mendieta to the more recent narrative of Rigoberta Menchú, the colonization of language, which was paralleled with acts of resistance and the effort to maintain the continuity of the classical legacy, was constantly haunted by the emergence of resisting communities and the vital force of their own Amerindian traditions.

CONCLUSION

Colonial situations, as I suggested at the beginning, are largely shaped by semiotic interactions and by their cultural productions. I have attempted to show some relevant aspects of this process by looking at the philosophy of writing underlying Spanish intellectuals' beliefs and the courses of action taken to civilize the natives. I have shown that the process was far from successful and was not accomplished smoothly. Acts of resistance at the level of semiotic interactions have resulted in a discontinuity of the Greco-Roman legacy in which the efforts to spread Western literacy were grounded. More specifically, my argument moved through the following steps.

First, the philosophy of language underlying Nebrija's belief that a grammar of the Castilian language was a necessary condition for the expansion of the Spanish kingdom was anchored in a strong belief in the superiority of alphabetic writing. Second, the philosophy of language underlying the missionaries' belief that lacking alphabetical writing was synonymous with lacking enlightenment and that, in the chain of writing, alphabetical writing was the most perfect kind and superior to Chinese and Mesoamerican writing

⁶⁷ Frank Salomón, "Chronicles of the Impossible: Notes on Three Peruvian Indigenous Historians," *From Oral to Written Expression: Native Andean Chronicles of the Early Colonial Period*, R. Adorno, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Foreign and Comparative Studies, 1982).

systems was a necessary consequence of the Renaissance philosophy, which celebrated alphabetic writing. Third, the philosophy of writing and the concept of the book underlying the missionaries' belief that they were authorized to colonize native language by writing grammars for the natives and to colonize native discursive practices by writing the histories of the natives was the construction of a cultural literacy which went hand in hand with the Renaissance philosophy of writing language and writing. Fourth, the philosophy of language and of written practices underlying Amerindian resistance and opposition to the colonization process was, on the one hand, a natural reaction to the effort to spread Western literacy as well as a symptom of the discontinuity of the Greco-Roman legacy.

I hope to have convinced the reader that the theoretical approach to colonial situations advanced almost forty years ago by Balandier would benefit not only from social sciences but also from the contributions of disciplines centered on language and from the perspective that the humanities can bring to hard-core social scientists.