

1492-1992: RE/DISCOVERING

COLONIAL WRITING

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René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini, Editors

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CHAPTER 1:
LITERACY AND COLONIZATION:
THE NEW WORLD EXPERIENCE

Walter D. Mignolo

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST AND SPEAKING THE PRESENT

Understanding the past could hardly be a solitary and monologic enterprise. Understanding is, on the contrary, a communal and dialogic venture. As long as my understanding of the past has to be communicated it cannot be rendered in a neutral language or discourse. It is relative to an audience and to a context of description (e.g., the context I have chosen to make the past event or object meaningful). Understanding the past cannot be detached from speaking the present, just as the need of speaking the present is what motivates me to understand the past. Contemporary concerns with literacy and the growing interest in re-reading the texts and events of the conquest and colonization of the New World are the parameters from which this essay has arisen. The "fusion of hori-

zons," in hermeneutical parlance, could be interpreted as the encounter between our manner of speaking the present with the ways in which our ancestors spoke their present. The encounter should not necessarily be "friendly" (e.g., tracing back our own genealogy) but "critical" (e.g., detaching ourselves from a cultural or scholarly legacy). The links between the past which we strive to understand and the present which motivates us to speak do not always shine in front of our eyes. More often than not the links belong to the region that Ortega y Gasset identified as the underground of every act of saying. Thus the constant need for new interpretations, be they of texts, events, actions or ideas.

In this essay I shall explore, from a semiotic perspective, some consequences of Western literacy in the colonization of the New World at the time of the initial extensive contacts between Spanish and Amerindian cultures.¹ I am concerned primarily with the consequences of a communicative nature and I will focus, therefore, on communicative forms spanning cultural boundaries. Human communicative interactions cannot be divorced from factors of a socio-economic and psychological nature. However, my aim is to understand a specific aspect of communication, and which in light of the particular historical situation of the New World, I condense in the notion of "colonization" (Balandier 1951). It is my conviction that even today we hold some of the beliefs about the nature of language and its function in society which were held by the men of letters in charge of either educating the natives or justifying the education of the natives. Such a conception is related to our ideas about literacy and our belief that alphabetic writing is intrinsically superior to any other writing system. I will try to show, by examining communication forms across cultural boundaries, that the distinction between understanding the past and speaking the present implies also understanding how the present was spoken in the past. I shall focus on the voice of the colonizer and I will compare it, whenever possible and necessary, with the voice of the colonized. The comparison, which we can no longer avoid, will allow me to put in a regional context presuppositions about languages and

cultures which became universals of human cultures in the pen of those who were able to write and be heard. When the fields of study are complex communicative forms and events, what interests the scholar is not so much what is being said as the presuppositions and strategies governing the saying. Thus, the colonizers' beliefs in their right to speak and write, their belief in the correspondence between their saying and the reality of the world, and the links between the system of belief and alphabetic literacy are at the center of my investigation. Furthermore, given that the natural difficulties of speaking and communicating in different languages are increased in a colonial situation (Balandier 1951) by the difficulties of the clash between different writing systems (Scharlau 1986: 94-156; 1987a, 1987b; Gruzinsky 1988: 15-99), literacy becomes a natural area of concern when communicative forms and events across cultural boundaries are at stake.

THE TYRANNY OF THE ALPHABET

Diego de Landa (in the Yucatan Peninsula) and Diego de Valadés (in Mexico) are two examples that enable us to understand the tyranny of the alphabet in sixteenth-century Europe and its implications for the colonization of the New World.

Two of the most spectacular performances of Diego de Landa in the Yucatan Peninsula were the burning of the Mayan's written records (which were called "books" in Castilian) and his attempt to translate Mayan hieroglyphs into the letters of the Roman alphabet (Landa 1566; 1941). While book-burning was not commonplace in the colonization of the New World, translating hieroglyphs into alphabetic units was, and this perhaps was one of the first efforts in Western civilization to use the letters of the alphabet as a means of conquest and colonization. Landa's assumption that hieroglyphs were a form of alphabetic writing was certainly amazing (Figure 1). Landa, as well as many contemporary educated persons, acted on the assumption that the history of writing in human culture is

an ascending process moving from Sumerian cuneiform (proto)writing to the Greek alphabet (true writing). His assumption was based on the belief that "true" writing is any system of graphic signs which could be used as an alternative to oral discourse (Ong 1982: 84). Harris (1986:45) has observed, from a linguistic point of view, that "Landa's Maya alphabet stands as a kind of permanent folly in the history of linguistics. What it reveals is the depths of incomprehension which centuries of alphabetic culture can inculcate about the nature of writing."² From the point of view of the consequences of literacy in the colonization of the New World, Landa's example stands as a permanent folly and as a paradigmatic example of "communication" (e.g., interacting in different sign systems) between members of a literate community (e.g., in the restricted sense of having alphabetic writing, of having letters) with members of societies with different writing systems.

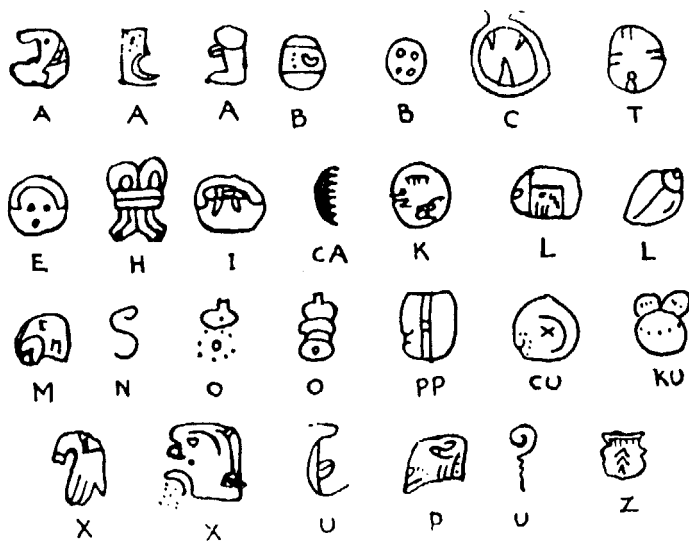


Fig. 1. Diego de Landa's "Maya Alphabet"

The second example, also very well known, is an early version of the mnemonic technique for learning the alphabet assembled by Diego de Valadés (1575). In the chapter devoted to different forms of exercising memory (a common preoccupation among rhetoricians [Yates 1966; Spence 1984]), Valadés developed a theory about the images of the "letter" based on the images of the sound and the graphic image. In the first mode, the images of the letters are formed by the sound of the voice and are illustrated with proper names: A, Antonio; B, Bartolomé, etc. This is most interesting, because the obvious graphic nature of any writing system is the image of the letter according to the figure it resembles. Valadés came up with a "translation" of the graphic images of the letters, in Ludovico Dolce's mnemonic alphabet, into figures common to the Aztec world (Figures 2 and 3). The introduction of alphabetic writing and the phonetic notation used for the transcription of native languages have been considered a decisive intellectual revolution (Ricard 1947; 1986: 378-379). And they were. Not only—and necessarily—toward the successful teaching of the Christian Doc-

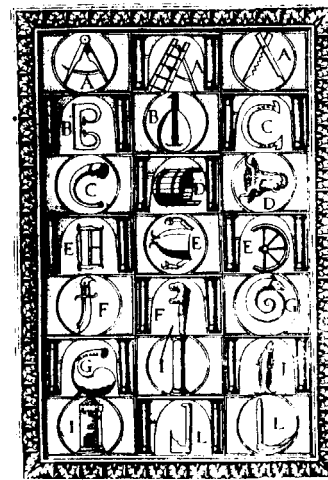


Fig. 2. Dolce's alphabet (*Dialogo nel qual si ragiona del modo de accrescere a conservar memoria*, Venice, 1562).

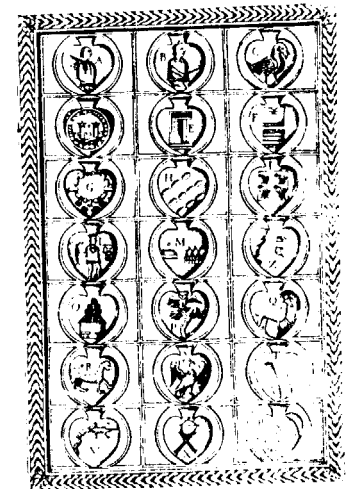


Fig. 3. Valadés's alphabet (*Rhetorica christiana*, Perusa, 1579).

trine, but also in the sense that a mixed nature of writing (Scharlau 1987a and 1987b) and of forms of communications (Gruzinsky 1988: 72-73) were among the first visible consequences of literacy in a colonial situation. The changes in communication forms could be understood by the description, provided by Valadés himself, of the communicative situation by means of pictographic and ideographic written signs which the Aztecs utilized. Valadés described the kind of communicative situation in which they had an extensive dialogue on the basis of some kind of graphic drawing. They sat, according to Valadés, on bended knee, squatting on their heels. He also observed that although the Aztec Lords would sit on three-legged stools or seats with back rests, they too would crouch down on their heels, especially when discussing business matters. One of the features of alphabetic writing—which we can guess was one taken for granted by Castilian men of letters—is that it permits us to communicate at a distance and to detach the "letter" (as image of the sound) from the body (Gumbrecht 1985; Mignolo 1987b).

These two examples illustrate at once the social construction and self-representation of communicative forms, and the social roles assigned to them which emanated from the communicative forms and situations shaped by alphabetic writing. I am not saying that alphabetic writing will, of necessity, originate under every circumstance the same kind of social construction and representation of communicative forms. It will take us too long, however, to explain the links between alphabetic writing, the program to expand the Christian Empire which began to emerge in fifteenth-century Italy (Roger 1962; Reinhard 1988),³ the conjunction between religious motives, economic conditions and technical developments which converted the Book not only into a sacred object but also into the warranty of knowledge and truth (Skeat 1969; Clanchy 1983).⁴ What Harris (1986: 46) had to say about the tyranny of the alphabet in the history of writing and culture is appropriate to the understanding of the consequences of literacy in the colonization of the New World.

The tyranny of the alphabet is part of that scriptist bias which is deeply rooted in European education. It fosters respect for the written word over the spoken, and respect for the book above all as a repository of both the language and the wisdom of the former ages.

"Western literacy" would be a better expression to refer to the issues I would like to address in this essay. It is apparent that the idea of speech and writing held by Castilian men of letters was of crucial importance in the colonization of the New World. Their conception of writing

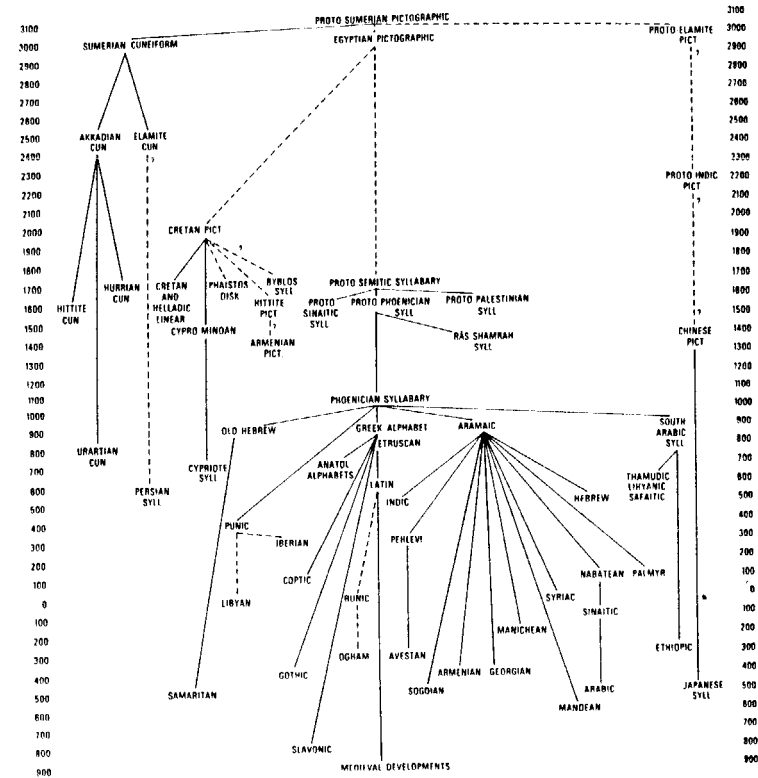


Fig. 4. The History of Writing (hypothetical) (From Gelb 1952).

was based on an evolutionary writing at the end of which the alphabet was waiting. It obliterates the fact that the history of writing should be perceived from a co-evolutionary point of view and that "literacy," properly speaking, is a conceptualization of writing based on the alphabet and the concept of "letter" (Figure 4). The fact remains that Castilians were able to build a pedagogical, administrative and philosophical apparatus based on their conception of language and of a hierarchy of human beings with respect to their lack, or possession of, alphabetic writing.

LITERACY: A WORKING DEFINITION

The tyranny of the alphabet is of crucial importance for what Ricard called "the spiritual conquest" (1947) and, recently, Gruzinsky (1988) "the colonization of the imaginary." By the expression "literacy and colonization" I intend to bring to the fore a spectrum of activities and conceptualizations based on the experience of alphabetic writing which have already been exposed in narratives about the spiritual conquest and the colonization of the imaginary (see also Kobayasi 1974). I hope to underline, under the concept of literacy, a spectrum of activities and conceptualizations which will go beyond the actual process of alphabetization and christianization, to include the rationale behind the conquest as well as a philosophy of administration strictly related to literacy. But, first, we need a working definition of "literacy."

Since the publication of the classic article by Goody and Watt (1963), echoing, perhaps, some early observations made by Lévi-Strauss (1953: 264-65) in which the French anthropologist was referring to writing (*écriture*) and not to alphabetical writing, the debates over the "big divide" between oral and written based societies have grown constantly at the same time that writing and alphabetic writing slipped toward an almost synonymous meaning. Some of the theses advanced in that article were revised and changed by Goody himself (1977: 36-51; 1987); others have been challenged by more social and cognitive ori-

ented theories of literacy (Scribner and Cole 1981; Finnegan 1988). A review of the literature and the diverse issues in which the field of literacy research has grown (Chafe and Tannen: 1987)⁵ does not concern me in this essay. I am interested, more particularly, in the consequences of literacy and the transformation of communicative forms in colonial situations in which a minority from a society which validates alphabetic writing interacts with members and institutions of a society with picto-ideographic writing systems. A working definition of literacy is required which will allow us to create a critical distance between the past that we construct and the present that we speak.

The term "literacy" has been and is being used in a wide variety of contexts (Graff 1981). From the straightforward competence in reading and writing to an educated knowledge about a given subject matter (cultural literacy), to a canonical knowledge of objects and cultural events (cultural literacy) to the challenge opened by the diversity of cultures and traditions (multicultural literacy). Scribner (1984) has reduced the notion of literacy to three metaphors: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power and literacy as a state of grace. In the first category she included the views according to which literacy helps the individual become integrated in the social domain and have a better adaptation to social life. The second category refers to those who emphasize the "relationship between literacy and group or community advancement." Scribner aligns in this view Freyre's (1970) philosophy of education, in which effective literacy education, in his view, "creates a critical consciousness through which a community can analyze its conditions of social existence and engage in effective action for a just society" (1984: 10). Finally, by literacy as a state of grace Scribner understands the long tradition of attributing special powers to those who are literate. And she adds: "In the perspective of Western humanism, literateness has come to be considered synonymous with being 'cultured', using the term in the old-fashioned sense to refer to a person who is knowledgeable about the content and techniques of the sciences, arts, and humanities as they have evolved historically" (1984:12). Scribner

observes, furthermore, that the term sounds elitist and archaic, but insists that "the notion that participation in a literate—that is, bookish—tradition enlarges and develops a person's essential self is pervasive and still undergirds the concept of a liberal education." It is my contention, in this essay, that in order to have a critical understanding of the past (e.g., the colonization of the New World) we need to critically examine the ways we speak the present (e.g., our notion of literacy). Insofar as we are united with our ancestors by our beliefs in "literacy as a state of grace" we would have difficulties in understanding that the colonization process is not only enacted by those who believe in literacy as a state of grace but also by those who have a different writing system, an entirely different view of what speaking, writing, and education are all about (Gruzinsky 1988: 15-100). If it can be maintained, as I have already pointed out (Ricard (1947; 1986: 117-137; 378-379), that alphabetization in the New World was a true revolution, we should ask at the same time for whom such a statement holds its true value. We need, then, a working definition of "literacy" which will allow us to understand, on the one hand, the spectrum of activities that Castilians engaged in to implement a new technology (alphabetic writing) and, on the other, the whole domain of ideas and concepts they inferred from the values they placed on writing and literacy as a state of grace.

It is necessary, in the first place, to distinguish "literacy" from "Literacy." In a restricted sense "literacy" refers to the basic competence of reading and writing as well as to the domain of ideas and values that, in Western civilization, have been attributed to alphabetic writing and the book. In a general sense "Literacy" could be used to refer to any kind of graphic semio-linguistic interactions as well as to the respective conceptualization regulating the range of discursive practices of a given group or community (Pattison 1982: 10-15). While "literacy" refers to a regional writing practice and to its conceptualization elaborated by the practitioners, "Literacy" could be taken as a theoretical term referring to a field of study. Since "Literacy" has the inconvenience of being a term forged within the Western conceptualization of the written word ("Literacy" is de-

rived from *littera*, a letter of the alphabet), it is perhaps advisable to have a different term to refer to different writing practices and their respective conceptualization in different cultures and traditions. Although an altogether new term will avoid misunderstanding and undue connotations, the fact remains that "writing" or "script" cannot be easily transformed to replace "literacy." I am happy, for the time being, in distinguishing a term that refers to a regional conceptualization of alphabetic writing ("literacy") from a term which designates a general field of study ("Literacy"). The first belongs to the community; the second is a disciplinary and theoretical concept. How much this distinction is needed (and perhaps a new term necessary) emerges from the fact that while "orality" can have a universal and non-problematic dimension "literacy," on the contrary, has the difficulties of universalizing a regional construction built around a given writing system and a set of communicative forms and interactions allowed by it. Before suggesting a term which will help us to distinguish the field of study from our own alphabetic habits, I would suggest distinguishing, on the one hand, speech and writing, and on the other, orality and literacy. I submit that such precautions are necessary since "literacy" is often used as synonymous with "writing" and sometimes with "alphabetic writing" thereby conveying the erroneous idea that literacy is a technology. In my working definition "literacy" is, once again, a name that captures the coexistence between a writing system and the conceptualization of its nature and social function.

The distinctions I have in mind are the following: 1) Human beings engage in oral and graphic communicative interactions; 2) Because of their recursive capacity, human beings are also able to conceptualize and refer to their own domain of interactions. "Speaking" and "writing" are the English terms which refer to both kinds of activities; 3) Finally, and because of their recursive capacity, human beings are able to conceptualize, refer to and describe the oral and written domain of interactions in terms of the oral and written practices of the group or community and the function of speech and writing in social life; to identify their practices in terms that authorize the difference from

other practices and communities. Thus, while (in Castilian) *letrado* meant a cultivated person, *tlamatinime* (in Náhuatl) meant "he who has the wisdom of the word." While we can say, from an observer's point of view, that both conceptualizations have the same function, their respective natures are culture-relative. Levels 1 and 2 are covered by research on the relationship between spoken and written languages (Tannen 1982; Tannen and Chaffe 1987). Level 3 is, in my understanding, what has been opened up by the pioneering studies done by Goody and Watt (1963) and Goody (1977) in the context of cross-cultural communication, and by Havelock (1963, 1982) and Ong (1982) in the context of the history of Western civilization.

These preliminary distinctions require us to bear in mind that while the very conception of human beings presupposes speech, writing instead is not a necessary condition of humanness. A great time span separates the Homo Sapiens from the invention of writing (circa 3,000 years B.C.). On the other hand, we should keep in mind (as Figure 4 indicates) that the history of writing is not an evolutionary processes driving toward the alphabet, but rather a series of coevolutionary processes in which different writing systems followed their own transformations. This observation alerts us to the fact that the "lack of letters" that Castilians were ready to note in Amerindian cultures should be translated today as "having a picto-ideographic system of writing." It would be a useful thought-experiment, if nothing else, to think that the the Aztecs, for instance, could have noticed that Castilians "lacked the red ink and the black ink" as they used to refer to their own writing practices (Leon-Portilla 1961: 48-76).

As a consequence of what has been said, I will use orality and literacy to refer to a conscious conceptualizations of linguistic (oral and written) practices by those who participate in them. When we look, for instance, at the Aztecs' conceptualization of their different oral and written practices (Leon-Portilla 1961: 48-75; 1980: 15-35; 1985: 43-66); the sophisticated conceptualization of speech in Tzotzil's communities (Gossen 1974; 1985); the Dogon's

categorization of their own oral practices (Calame-Griaule 1965: 21-92; 447-504); or how the Vai from Sierra Leone conceptualize their different written practices (Arab, English, Vai; Scribner and Cole 1979: 140-160), we soon realize that conceptualization of oral and graphic communication is a common feature of human communities. I would use "orality" to refer to the level of metalinguistic reflections and conceptualizations (expressed in speech or writing) of oral practices, and "literacy" to the level of metalinguistic reflections and conceptualization of written practices (expressed in speech or writing). While the former pair refers to communicative interactions accomplished through sounds and graphic marks respectively, the latter pair refers to the conceptualization of the social interactions by means of sounds or graphic marks. Neither should the tyranny of the alphabet obscure the fact that societies with primary oral means of communication have an equally sophisticated conceptualization of the nature and functions of language as societies with primary written forms of communication (Calame-Griaule 1965; Gossen 1974; 1985); nor should the fact that the natural differences between oral and written interactions and the differences between writing systems be automatically translated into cultural values (Gough 1968; Wood 1985: 1-20; 58-89; 117-124). In any event, it is not my intention to discuss here the consequence of literacy in the history of human culture, but rather to assess the consequences of the clash between alphabetic and picto-ideographic literacies in a colonial situation.

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Beginnings are arbitrary and relative to a context of description (Said 1975: 27-78). If the origins or beginnings of Latin American culture are sought, it may be advisable to look to 1524 rather than 1492. The pertinent questions are what is a beginning, and for whom (Danto 1962; 1985: 285-98, 342-364; Said 1975: 50-52). The true communication across cultural boundaries and the beginning of a plurilingual and multicultural society in which a high

number of native languages are still dominated by the language of the colonizers (Spanish, Portuguese and French, just to name the "Latin" ones), could be traced back to 1524 when the Franciscans began their alphabetization campaign and their millenarian kingdom (Phelan 1956; 1972: 65-116). I take the introduction of the alphabet as the beginning of a ramified history or a set of co-evolutionary histories (yet to be written) of what we understand today by "Latin America."

While Landa and Valadés were good examples illustrating the tyranny of the alphabet, the testerian "alphabet" is an excellent example of communication across cultural boundaries when what is at stake are not only different languages and cultures but also different writing systems. Testera has been celebrated for his "alphabet" (Figure 5), which was used to teach Christian prayers to the natives who did not know Spanish and were unable to read their own speech transcribed in alphabetic writing (León 1900). Mendieta calls it a "curiosity" (instead of a "folly"). The fact remains that the clash of different writing systems motivated, at the beginning, the



Fig. 5. The Testerian Catechism.

invention of graphic signs which would help the transition between picto-ideographic and alphabetic writing. Motolinía (1536-41: II, vi) reported how the natives confessed themselves by using figures (*figuras y caracteres*). He decided to confess only those who were able to "write" their sins in figures; those who knew how to paint and communicate by means of figures and were able to make themselves understood. Although Motolinía did not make any distinction between the conventional picto-ideograms painted by the professional *tlacuilo* and the figures drawn by those who needed to confess, it remains true that Motolinía, according to his description, participated in a conversation across cultural boundaries in which oral understanding was achieved by looking at graphic signs and by talking them out in conversation. The encounter between alphabetization (knowing how to read and write alphabetic writing) and literacy (learning the system of values attached to reading and writing) generated, during the sixteenth century, a dialogue across cultural boundaries in which the picto-ideographic writing system was overridden. Oral language and orality cannot be suppressed. Written language and its corresponding literacy can. Thus, we have today, on the one hand, scholars devoted to reading ancient codices in which the sign has remained but the knowledge about the sign (literacy) is gone, and, on the other, hundreds of native languages being spoken, while the alphabet is the only writing system in use.

The saga of the twelve mendicant friars from the instant the Pope authorized their mission to the moment they arrived in Mexico has been extensively reported (Motolinía 1536-41; Mendieta 1596, book III; Torquemada 1615, book XV) as well as studied (Ricard 1947; Kobayashi 1974, iv; Baudot 1976: 71-118; Duverger 1988: 153-227). This event was due to a petition from Cortés to Charles V who subsequently forwarded it to Pope Leo X. Mendieta reported that when Charles V requested help from the Pope to christianize the recently conquered people, he called a meeting of men of letters, theologians and jurists in order to inform himself about the correct procedures. Disregarding the fact that Mendieta is writing well after

the debates about the legitimation of the conquest, what should catch our attention here is the fact that the King called a meeting of the most prominent men of letters, theologians and jurists ("hizo junta de letrados los más eminentes de sus reinos, teólogos y juristas"). The relevance of this move for understanding the consequences of literacy in a colonial situation could be seen, on the one hand, in the reports in which the process of alphabetization has been described and in the dialogues between the twelve friars and Aztec representatives (*principales*) transcribed in the well-known *Coloquios de 1524* (Sahagún 1564) and, on the other hand, in the use made of the alphabet by the natives to preserve traditions that were either being transmitted orally or were fixed in pictographic writing.

The first example comes from Pedro de Gante in a letter to Philip II in which he reports the actions taken and the efforts made by the friars when they arrived in Mexico (Icazbalceta 1941). He underscored the friars' efforts in learning 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" ("era gente sin escritura, sin letras, sin caracteres y sin lumbre de cosa alguna," Icazbalceta 1941). The comparison between de Gante's report and Torquemada's observation about the difficulties of possessing a history when letters are lacking (see below) allows us to make some complementary comments. While Torquemada aligned the Aztecs' lack of letters with their lack of written histories, de Gante equated such an inadequacy with their deprived intelligence. The two correlations are not contradictory, by any means; they are perfectly complementary. In the first place, it made it seem natural that the Castilians were quickly self-appointed to write the history that the Aztecs needed but did not have. Secondly, it justified and legitimized the time and effort that the Religious Orders devoted to the introduction of literacy (e.g., to read and write as well as a given conception of the values implied in reading and writing) in order to enlighten the natives.

Values orient and support actions. Pedro de Gante reported in detail how they proceeded in order to transmit the "letter" to those who did not possess it. First, they assembled the children from the native nobility (*principales y señores*) in order to teach them God's Law, expecting (or instructing) them to transmit it to their parents as well as other relevant persons in their surroundings. Not long after the arrival of the twelve friars, de Gantes declares:

At 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 served countless souls (Translated by Noel Fallows)

Se juntaron luego poco más o menos mill moachos, los cuales teníamos encerrados en nuestra casa de día y de noche, no les permitiendo ninguna conversación con sus padres, y menos con sus madres, salvo solamente con los que los servían y les traían de comer; y esto para que se olvidaran de sus excesivas idolatrías y excesivos sacrificios, donde el demonio se aprovechaba de innumerable cantidad de ánimas (Icazbalceta 1941: 204).

The interpretation of this paragraph shows that literacy is not instilled without violence. The violence, however, is not located in the fact that the youngsters have been assembled and enclosed day and night. It comes, rather, from the interdiction of having conversations with their parents, particularly with their mothers. In a primary oral society, in which virtually all knowledge is transmitted by means of conversation, the preservation of oral contact was contradictory with the effort to teach how to read and write. Forbidding conversations with the mother meant, basically, depriving the children of the living culture imbedded in the language and preserved and transmitted in speech.

The same underlying principle applies to the *Coloquios de 1524*. Mendieta offered a brief summary of the first dialogue in which, according to the author, after the friars informed the Aztec representatives about their goals and explained to them the Christian Doctrine, the *principales* readily accepted what the friars told them. When we read the *Coloquios* in Sahagún's version, we may conclude 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 (León Portilla 1986) or in English (Klor de Alva 1980)⁶ what appears is a totally different picture (Mignolo 1988a). What are the consequences of literacy in these examples? After hearing the explanation of the Christian Doctrine, the Aztec *principales* asked the friars whether they had to abandon their own gods and traditions. To the affirmative reply of the friars, the Aztecs asked for a reason. To which the friars answered that everything they needed to know was written in the Divine Book. This simple answer revealed how much Castilians were involved in the tyranny of the alphabet since they had already forgotten the oral tradition of what they trusted as the Divine Book (Sanders 1985: 21-44; 1987: 175-192; Mignolo 1987b). The *Coloquios* are a clear example of the scriptist bias rooted in European education since the Renaissance (Pagden 1982: 185-90). The respect it fosters for the written word over the spoken is shared both by religious as well as academic communities (Ong 1982: 65-75). On the other hand, the written version of oral conversations which took place over an extended period of time (Klor de Alva 1982) in the year 1524, and which was reorganized by Sahagún (1564) to be printed at a later date (Pou y Martí 1924), is also an example of the versatility of alphabetic writing. Such writing makes it possible for what has been said to be fixed, and allows for the transmission of a text through time, losing, of course, the act of saying but keeping what has been said. This example shows that whatever may have taken place orally during the encounter between the twelve friars and the Aztec Lords, alphabetic writing gave control of the situation to the Castilians, for even if a version of the dialogue was

written in Náhuatl, control of alphabetic writing and printing was in the hands of the colonizer.

But of course, not every step taken toward the alphabetization of the natives resulted in the desired effects which, from the friars' point of view, was for the good of the natives who would have the chance of changing their own "wrong" traditional and barbarous behavior to the "right" new and civilized one. Three examples illustrate the unexpected consequences of literacy in a colonial situation. The first has been reported by Mendieta and happened in Mexico; the second by Fray Francisco Ximénez and happened in the Yucatan; the third comes from colonial Peru, by comparing Garcilaso de la Vega with Guamán Poma de Ayala.

The children who, according to Pedro de Gante's letter to Philip II, were said to have been locked up in the monasteries, were not entirely from noble families. As is natural, the Aztec noble families 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 it a point to report 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 hábiles, y vinieron después a ser alcaldes y gobernadores, y mandar a sus señores" (III, xv)).⁷

It is within the context of unexpected consequences that 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 (Garza 1980; Edmonson 1985; Edmonson and Bricker 1985), could be explained. There is enough evidence to believe that the former (which were written in Yucatec and in European script), were transcriptions in alphabetic writing of the old hieroglyphic (or "painted") *códices*. Historians of the Yucatan Peninsula (Landa c.1566; Sánchez de Aguilar 1639; Avendaño y Loyola 1696: p.35r; López Cogolludo 1688) have had reactions to native writing systems and "books," similar to those of the historians of the Aztec civilization.

They have reported, for instance, that the natives would read the book in their assembly; that some of them were read following the rhythm of the drums; that others were sung, and still others were enacted. There is also evidence (Roy 1933: 5) that these "books" as we know them today were compiled not before the seventeenth or the eighteenth centuries. Consequently, what today is considered an "encyclopedia" or a mixture of genres (Tozzer 1921: 182-92; Roy 1933:3; Garza 1980: XXIX-XLI), presumably existed, before they were compiled in a single unit, as a diversity of genres common to pictographic writing (book-keeping, time-reckoning) without parallel in oral genres. As time went on, the European script that the friars were so eager to transmit in order to be more effective in the christianization of the natives was used by the latter to stabilize their past, to adapt themselves to the present and to transmit their own traditions to future generations.

Rigoberta Menchú's recent narrative of the life and deeds of a Quiché community is an outstanding example of the "consequences" of literacy from the colonial period to the present. 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 tell them that they 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 that 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 (1984:13).

In colonial Peru, Garcilaso de la Vega was the perfect example of the adaptation (in order to criticize it) to Western literacy (González Echevarría 1987), while Guamán Poma epitomizes the use of alphabetic writing in order to resist the literacy of the colonizer (Adorno 1986). In fact, although Garcilaso was able to write as a Castilian native speaker and to assimilate their conceptualization of writing, history and the social role corresponding to writing activities (i.e., *letrado*), Guamán Poma also managed to have his message understood by a Spanish reader. In his "*coronica*" to King Philip III, Guamán Poma expressed his acute dissatisfaction through a counter-proposal for the administration and government of Peru, using alphabetical writing together with pictorial representation in order to convey his message. Thus, Guamán Poma was able to intermingle the literacy of his own ancestors with Western literacy, to make himself understood by his "others" without losing his own identity (Adorno 1988a). When compared with the *Popol Vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam*, Garcilaso and Guamán serve to illuminate several aspects of literacy in a colonial situation. They both preserved the authorial identity already linked to Western literacy; they used Castilian instead of their own native languages to convey their message to a Castilian audience (in spite of the obvious differences); they wrote for an audience that was detached from the act of writing and which would not have the need to crouch down and look at the pictures while listening to the authors' narrations in order to understand the message. On the contrary, the "books" from the Yucatan Peninsula were anonymous and collective, written in the native languages and, consequently, addressed to a native audience, which preferred "listening" to an oral performance over "reading" the pages of a "book."

Examples of this sort enable us to reconstruct a wide spectrum of the consequences of (Western) literacy in the colonization of the New World. At one end of the spectrum we have the meeting between Charles V and the men of letters, and the friars' program to alphabetize the natives. At the other end we witness the uses of writing by natives in order to preserve and transmit what had until

then been kept in memory and transmitted orally, as well as to interpret in alphabetic writing what had until then been recorded in painted images and interpreted orally. In the middle, so to speak, is Garcilaso who will fully embrace Western literacy in order to criticize the colonizer; and Guamán Poma who will use Western literacy in order to resist it. Even though script was secondary within native and marginal communities—as we can gather from Rigoberta Menchú's narrative, for not everybody knew how to read and write—the forms of communications in oral traditions dislocated the importance that alphabetic writing had in the European tradition. The fact remains that alphabetic writing used for purposes beyond the intention of those who planned and programmed the alphabetization of the colonized, as well as the silence to which the "illiterate" are reduced, reveal one of the major communicative paradoxes of a colonial situations, to which the New World experience is not an exception. While literacy is conveyed, initially, in order to govern and control the native population, it is prevented, ultimately, in order to have the same results (P. Freyre).

From the mendicant friars to Paulo Freyre, and from Guamán Poma to Rigoberta Menchú, the spectrum of communicative interactions across semiotic and cultural boundaries becomes a field open to investigation in our efforts to understand the past. But it also becomes a field of reflection once we accept that the romance languages in Latin America (Spanish, Portuguese, French) are surrounded by the plurality of the native languages. In this context, communication across cultural boundaries is not only a field of investigation to be explored in our understanding of the past but a domain of human interactions to be enacted in our speaking the present.

LITERACY AND SOCIAL ROLES

According to the working definition of orality and literacy, we human beings do not only speak and write. We also have opinions about what speech and writing are, their values, how they are relevant to society, and how

societies characterize themselves according to the kind of communicative interactions they engage in. Although this definition is valid, in the context of my discussion, for Castilian as well as Amerindian cultures at the time of the conquest and colonization, in the pages that follow I will focus on the Castilian construction of literacy and on its implementation in the colonization of the New World.

A word of common use, *letrado*, summarized a complex network of meaning derived from the name of alphabetic units: *letra*. *Letrado* had two basic meanings which the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (DI) describes as follows: (a) *letrado* was applied to those having scientific knowledge, for scientific knowledge was matched to the written word (letters) ("es el docto en las ciencias que porque estas se llamaron letras, se le dio este nombre. Viene del latino *litteratus*, que significa lo mismo"); (b) *letrado* was also applied to those expert in law (scribes, notaries, lawyers) rather than in sciences ("se llama comunemente al abogado. Lat. *Jurisperitus*, *Causidicus*").

Concerning the first case, it seems obvious that *letrado* came from *litteratus*, although it is less obvious that it meant the same. Parkes (1973) notes that in the Middle Ages it was applied only to those who possessed knowledge of Latin and was sometimes related to learning. Maravall (1953) emphasized the reverse aspect: learning was mainly related to the knowledge of Greek and Latin. Clanchy (1979, 1981) reported that while toward the twelfth century "clericus meant *litteratus*" and "laicus meant *illiteratus*," the synonymy was due to a semantic change by means of which *litteratus* and *clericus* became interchangeable with terms meaning "learned" or "scholarly." Clanchy suggested that while the antithesis *clericus*: *laicus* was a Medieval creation, *litteratus*: *illiteratus* had a Roman origin. The reference to the origin of the word *litteratus* in DI seems to have a Roman rather than a Medieval background.

Concerning the second case, the meaning of the word began to reflect, toward the second half of the fifteenth century, a social change that could be described by inverting the hierarchical order which DI had registered in the eighteenth century. In fact, while a *letrado* in the sense of

"a learned and scholarly person" may seem at first glance to have a more prominent social role than a *letrado* as "a person schooled in law and legal matters," certain differences may be perceived upon close inspection. Gil Fernández (1982: 231-298) has expanded on the classic study by Maravall (1953) devoted to the idea of knowledge in the Middle Ages and the corresponding symbolic representation of social roles related to it, by describing the distribution of social roles and functions of grammarians, men of letters (*letrados*) and humanists during the sixteenth century. While in the Middle Ages—according to Gil Fernández—the hierarchy of knowledge had the theologians as a superior caste in relation to the grammarians, lawyers and notaries, the situation began to change in Spain, toward the end of the fifteenth century. Experts in legal matters held positions of increasing importance (Maravall 1953; 1967: 334). As they gained in social status so the meaning of the word *letrado* shifted. They became a caste that detached itself from both the Medieval *clericus* and the Renaissance humanist.

In the context of the colonization of the New World the *letrados* (men of letters) will be in charge of the intellectual legitimization of the conquest, whereas the *letrados* (experts in law and legal matters) will take over everything concerning policy-making and administration. However, despite their different social roles and functions, both have taken their names from the word *littera*, a letter of the alphabet.

LITERACY AND THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE CONQUEST

The arguments justifying the conquest and colonization could be divided into theological and rational categories. Theological arguments were mainly centered around the fight against the Devil who was the cause of all the wrongdoings. The relationship with literacy is not obvious and I do not wish to force a possible connection. However, literacy has a crucial, although not always clear, role in the rational arguments justifying the conquest.

Some of the rational arguments are as follows (Garzón Valdéz 1988):

a) The conquest and colonization have a paternalistic character which is ethically justified.

b) The conquest and colonization have a liberating character which aspires to eliminate barbarism and introduce civilization.

c) The conquest and colonization have a commercial character which aspires to increase and promote the exchange among different countries.

Literacy is obvious in argument *b* and implied in *a* and *c*. Argument *b* is clearly related to the tyranny of the alphabet and the connections between civilization and alphabetic writing. The mediated connections with the theological argument can be inferred from here: if literacy brings civilization it is also necessary for christianization. And christianization is the best way to fight against the Devil since the Devil was, after all, an invention of Christianity.

But let us concentrate on argument *b*. The Valladolid debates are the best examples of the role played by the men of letters in the legitimization of the conquest. Based on what we know about the conceptualization of their social role, it is not surprising that they were able to conjugate a conception of literacy in which one of the distinctive features of the "barbarians" was their lack of alphabetic writing (Pagden 1982) with a campaign of alphabetization which led to a civilization crusade (Ricard 1947; Baudot 1976: 71-118; Duverger 1987: 127-152; 169-190).

As surprising as it may sound, the belief that not every human society necessarily had "developed" oral communication was still a criterion to distinguish the civilized from the barbarians. This theory loses ground when confronted with the New World experience. From the first Castilian report written by someone who spent some time living with the natives (Pané 1493), the lack of speech and language was never an issue. However, countless numbers of pages have been devoted to mention the fact that the Amerindians did not have alphabetic writing and to speculate on its consequences. Castilian historians and chroniclers deplored the fact that, because

of their lack of alphabetic writing, Amerindians were unequipped to keep exact records of their past or to build a coherent narrative of their origins (Mignolo 1981a; 1981b; 1986c). Thus, Fray Ramon Pané (1493) repeatedly pointed toward the contradictions in *tainos'* narratives which he sees as a direct consequence of the lack of alphabetic writing. Almost a century later, Torquemada (1615) had the same attitude toward what he considered were the necessary connections between having alphabetic writing and possessing a history. A few years before Torquemada, Father Acosta (Sandoval 1945: 80-83) reacted to Father Tovar's report on the Indians of New Spain by asking a specific question: how can they have history and beautiful figures of speech (as Father Tovar reported) if they did not have writing (Mignolo 1981a; 1981b; Pagden 1982: 185-90). A quote from Torquemada allows me to make my point clearer:

One of the things which causes the most confusion in a republic and which greatly perplexes those who wish to discuss its causes, is the lack of precision with which they consider their history; for if history is an account of events which are true and actually happened and those who witnessed them and learned about them neglected to preserve the memory of them, it will require an effort to write them down after they have happened, and he who wishes to do so will grope in the dark when he tries, for he may spend his life collating the version which he is told only to find that at the end of it he still has not unravelled the truth. This (or something like this) is what happens in this history of New Spain, for just as the ancient inhabitants did not have letters, or were even familiar with them, so they neither left records of their history (translated by Noel Fallows)

Una de las cosas que mayor confusión causan en una república y que más desatinados trae a los hombres que quieren tratar sus causas es la poca puntualidad que hay en considerar sus historias; porque si historia es una narración de cosas acaecidas y verdaderas y los que las vieron y supieron no las dejaron por memoria, sera fuerza al que después de acaecidas quiere escribirlas, que vaya a ciegas en el tratarlas, o que en cotejar las varias que se dicen, gasta la vida y quede

al fin de ella sin haber sacado verdad en limpio. Esto (o casi esto) es lo que pasa en esta historia de la Nueva España porque como los moradores antiguos no tenían letras, ni las conocían, así tampoco no las historiaban (Torquemada, 1615, I,xi)

Although he recognized that the Aztecs had some kind of writing, it was not enough to replace the absence of letters (see also Acosta 1590: Book VI, Chapters 4 and 5). The nuisance that Torquemada found in picture writing was that a given case or event could be referred to or represented by only one figure ("una sola figura contenía la major parte del caso sucedido") and, consequently, since this manner of writing history was not common to all known communities (was not, in other words, hegemonic), it was relatively easy to change the organization of the event and, more often than not, to detach it from the truth ("muy facil variar el modo de la historia y muchas veces desarrimarla de la verdad y aun apartarla del todo").

All the actions taken by the friars in the process of alphabetization were supported by a sound conception of the nature and function of language in human communities and by the distinctions made between different kinds of human beings according to their forms of communication and discursive interactions. Pagden (1982) has traced the connections between the predominant philosophy of language, the image of the barbarians and the modifications forced upon existing ideas by the "discovery" of the New World. It is interesting to point out in connection with the topic of literacy and colonization, first, the attribution of "low" degrees of language development to human communities, and second, that human societies were ranked in the chain of being according to their lack or possession of alphabetic writing. Covarrubias (*apud* Pagden) stated: "We call barbarians those who are ignorant of letters, those who have bad customs and who act badly, those who are wicked and will refuse to communicate with other men of reason and live without [reason] and finally those who are without pity and cruel." DI has *inculto* and *grosero* as features characterizing the barbarians and one of the examples is "barbaric

language." Thus, *barbarismo* has been used to refer to a figure of speech or writing going against the established conventions of grammatical rules. It should be emphasized that although the idea of the barbarian is not limited to language it is also true that language has played an important role in the characterization of the barbarian. This conception also has played an important role in the legitimation of the conquest and has determined the consequences of literacy in the colonization of the New World.

In Las Casas's world all knowledge (*scientia*) was textually dependent (Pagden 1982: 129) and it was consistent with the description of *letrado* as a man of letters and knowledge. Using this assumption as a point of departure, it is easy to construe the opposition between literates and barbarians and to anchor the opposition in the lack of or possession of alphabetic script. The ability to create a system of writing, and the access to the power and knowledge that such a system conferred, was the ultimate token of the superiority of the 'civil' man over the 'barbarian', who lived always as a slave to those with greater wisdom than himself. For Aquinas and his sixteenth-century followers, the written language belonged essentially to a different category from the spoken one, the difference being represented in most cases by the difference between the vernacular tongues and Latin (Pagden 1982: 130). In this context Las Casas was able to write:

The second class of barbarians are those who lack a literary language (*qui literali sermone carent*) which corresponds to their maternal idiomatic language, as is Latin to us, and thus do not know how to express what they think (quoted by Pagden 1982:130)

I shall avoid the temptation of commenting on Las Casas's observation about Latin as a maternal language and shall limit myself to underlining the fact that a philosophy of language based on the tyranny of the alphabet and the superiority of knowledge secured by alphabetic writing, on the one hand, allowed the Castilians to justify the process of alphabetization and, on the other, is allowing us to understand the consequences of literacy in the process of colonization. When their justification is con-

fronted with our understanding we realize, at the same time, that the Castilians' justification was their way of speaking the present in the context of a colonial expansion as our understanding is our way of speaking the present in the context of decolonization.

A comparison between the philosophy of education implied in the colonial period, on one hand, and in Freyre, on the other, would help in elucidating the last statement. Freyre has been credited with teaching and disseminating literacy in a country kept ignorant and silent by centuries of Portuguese colonization. In his philosophy of education, literacy is the road to liberation instead of to christianization. However, it could be argued that in the mind of Castilian men of letters, christianization was also liberation: liberation from the oppression of the Devil. The capitalistic regimes supported by military forces in Latin America took the place of the Devil in the New World. Freyre, like the mendicant friars, could be understood as fighting the same battle. There is a difference, however. In the sixteenth century the addressees of the literacy campaigns were the children of influential families in pre-Columbian cultures, because they were like gentlemen and noble persons. The friars have their goals clear. They knew that putting literacy into the hands of Indian children, without making a class distinction, would endanger the very results of the alphabetization campaign. And, indeed, some experiences have been reported during the first years, when the Aztec Lords did not send their own children but the children of their vassals (Icazbalceta 1941: 55-56). However, if there is a difference between the mendicants and Freyre's literacy campaigns, it could be cast in the following terms: While literacy in the Spanish colonization was justified by the tyranny of the alphabet and effected by the domestication of a small and controllable number of people, Freyre's campaign of teaching the oppressed in order to help their liberation is justified by the links between literacy, critical thinking and consciousness.

LITERACY AND THE ORGANIZATION OF THE NEW WORLD

Three aspects of alphabetic writing interest us here (Ricoeur 1971; Tannen 1982: 1-16; Finnegan 1988: 139-174). One is its capacity to communicate at a distance; second, the power of a writing system to be understood and employed by those able to read directly, without the need for an oral narrative interpreting what has been written; and, third, the depersonalized communicative situation in which conversation is no longer needed to "read" the graphic signs. When an oral interpreter is needed in order to transmit the meaning of a written text, the power of writing is limited (Goody 1986: 91). The difference between writing for record-keeping and time-reckoning and writing as an alternative to oral communication lies precisely in this fact. Alphabetic writing, however, extended the domain of the letter beyond the field limited to the voice and the body. The *letrados*-jurists, the *Ordenanzas de Indias* and the *Relaciones geográficas de Indias* are paradigmatic examples of the social roles in charge of the organization of the New World and of the close connections between a use and conceptualization of alphabetic writing (Western literacy) and colonization.⁸

I have already mentioned that in the sixteenth century the *letrado*-jurists began to play a role as important as or more important than the *letrado*-humanists. The Council of the Indies which corresponded to the supreme direction of the New World had executive, judicial and legislative functions. It passed through diverse stages, initially as part of the Council of Castile, until it finally began its independent life in 1524. It was made up of councilors "*de capa y espada*" and "*consejeros togados*." The latter dominated the council through sheer force of numbers and through their experience in the affairs of the Indies, since many of them had been *oidores* in the *audiencias* or had filled government posts in the New World. All facets of life were subject to the jurisdiction of the Council, from high politics to detailed information on geography, political history, natural history, etc. (Malagón Barceló 1961:5). The *Ordenanzas de Indias* are a good example of this situation and, also, of the increasing role played by literacy in

the colonization of the New World. In *Ordenanza I*, for example, a "philosophy" for the administration of the New World, is laid down, and it makes clear that if the members of the Council of the Indies had to be honest persons of noble stock and reputable lineage ("*personas aprobadas en costumbres, nobleza, y limpieza de linajes*") it is because they are selected according to their knowledge (letters) and prudence ("*escogidos en letras y prudencia*"). It is also specified that the Council of the Indies will be composed of the president and eight *Consejeros Letrados*. Such *consejeros* are not the kind of *letrados* related to *scientia* but to the law. *Ordenanza XXVII* is entirely devoted to emphasizing the importance of reading and writing letters. The colonizers were aware that the writing technology provided by the alphabet made it possible to effectively conduct business (like today with the telephone and electronic mail) and take control of the people and the land by compiling a massive set of regulations (*Ordenanzas*) and a questionnaire (*Instrucción y memoria*) which generated a massive amount of information (*Relaciones geográficas de Indias*). *Letrados* and cosmographers joined forces to trace the boundaries (in words and maps) of the newly acquired domains.

The Council of the Indies was responsible, then, for planning and implementing the massive information-gathering operation known as the *Instrucción y Memoria* and the written result of it known as the *Relaciones geográficas de Indias* (Cline 1964; 1972). While the *Ordenanzas* and the *Instrucción y Memoria* enjoyed the benefit of the printing press and could be printed by the thousands and distributed to the most remote corners of the Spanish Empire, the *Relaciones geográficas* were hand-written and hand-engraved and only began to be published toward the end of the nineteenth century (Figure 6). However, for those in control of the administration of the Spanish Empire in the New World, the *Relaciones geográficas* represented a powerful instrument for writing and mapping. The fifty questions of the *Instrucción y Memoria*, which were distributed by the Council of the Indies to representative persons in the Spanish administration, generally ended up on the desk of a public notary who would

gather a representative number of Spanish and native people who would provide the answer to each question orally while the public notary fixed it in writing and sent it to his superior (Mignolo 1982: 70-73; Gruzinsky 1988: 101-138). After several steps of ascending order, and passing through the administrative hierarchy, the *Relación*, ended up in the hands of the Council (Mignolo 1987a: 456-62). What is relevant in this process is the fact that the oral report given by those who were invited to inform was written down by a *letrado* (public notary) who converted an oral situation into a written (alphabetic) report with administrative purposes.

Compared with the picto-ideographic writing system and mapping in pre-columbian Central Mexico, for instance, the *Relaciones geográficas* also illustrate the intervention of alphabetic literacy in picto-ideographic literacy. Alphabetic writing had not only made it possible to inscribe what had been said in a communicative situation (losing forever the act of saying and hearing in which

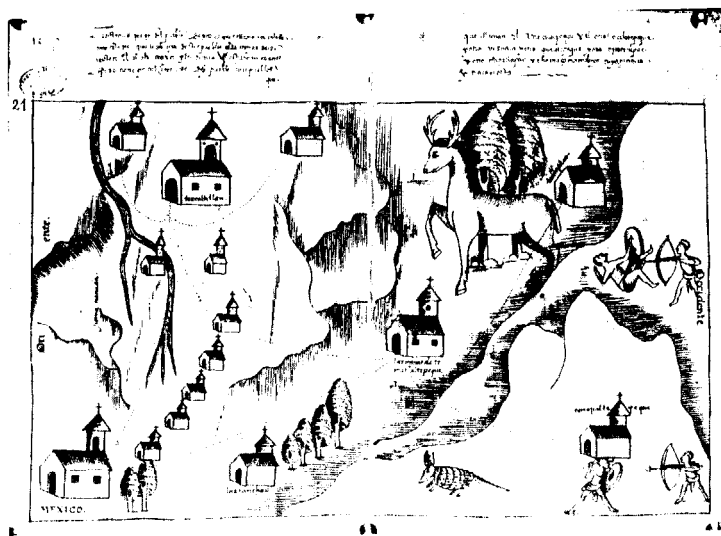


Fig. 6. Map from the *Relación* of Temazcaltepeque (Archivo de Indias).

the notary and the informant were involved) and to develop its own communicative strategies, but also allowed the detachment of alphabetic writing and mapping in a way that it is difficult to imagine for picto-ideographic writing and mapping (Teuber 1987).⁸ In fact, when we look at the alphabetic written report and the map of the *Relaciones*, we perceive a distance between the two which is much closer in native writing systems and mapping (Figure 7). Pre-conquest maps (as well as post-conquest maps of the early years) were more than a representation of space and distances (Caso 1949). They "maintained a mythical, social, political and economic memory of the past" (Gruzinsky 1987: 48). On the other hand, and paradoxically enough, alphabetic writing and mapping were as linked from a material and physical point of view as they were detached conceptually. As Gruzinsky has also suggested (1987: 55; 1988: 65-66), "Spanish sketching and alphabetical writing can hardly be dissociated: they were nothing but two different modulations of the same stroke of the pen." Consequently, it is possible to think that the alphabetization of the Indian nobility has meant that, as a consequence, the *tlacuilo* became used to the "stroke of the pen" modifying, in the process, the traditional fashion of "mapping." That is, just as by the same modulation of the pens, the *tlacuilo* was able to unite writing and mapping, so he was also (conceptually) learning to identify the distance between the discursive aspect of alphabetic writing and the iconic aspects of mapping (Gruzinsky 1988: 65-80).

While mapping the new territories was systematically handled by the Council of the Indies by means of the *Instrucción y Memoria*, the oral reports and the maps provided by the Amerindians were absorbed and controlled by the administrative network and the fifty questions listed in the *Instrucción y Memoria*. Three of the questions requested a map. The assimilation of the writing conventions introduced by Castilians implied a deep transformation of the very nature of the social role of the *tlacuilo* as well as his function in the social structure. Thus, while the *letrado* and the cosmographer in Castilian social structure were people mastering two different (and

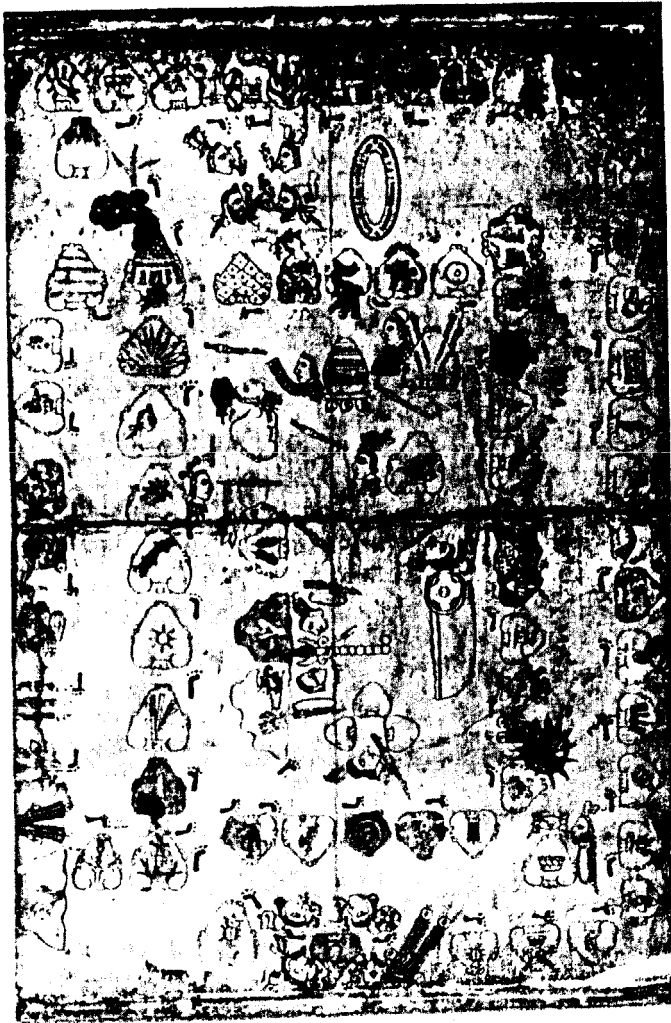


Fig. 7. Map of the border of Cuauhchinchan and Totomilhuacan (Boturini's collection).

interrelated) graphic conventions (writing letters and drawing maps) the *tlacuilo* in Aztec social structure were people mastering a code in which writing and mapping were not clearly distinguished.

Malagón Barceló (1961) has described the role of the *letrado* in the colonization of the New World in terms of what Goody (1986) subsequently, and coming from a different perspective, summarized in the expression "the logic of writing and the organization of the society." The *Relaciones geográficas de Indias* are a fitting example of the importance of writing in the organization of society as well as of the interrelations between writing and mapping in societies with different writing systems. Barceló has also observed that too much attention has been paid to the conquest of the New World and to the conquistadors while shadowing the role of literacy and the *letrados* ("the royal scribe, the judges, the *oidores*, in a word, the *letrados* or men of law") in the process of colonization (to colonize: to cultivate, to organize). As far as literacy—in the restricted sense—designates Western alphabetic writing and the system of values attributed to discursive practices, literacy is the basis for the justification of the conquest provided by the *letrado*-humanists and for the organization of society planned and carried out by the *letrado*-jurists. Their institutional locus was the Council of the Indies.

While Barceló has argued convincingly that the "Spanish empire was erected under the inspiration of the law" and its execution was in the hands of the *letrados*, I would like to emphasize that not only the law but also (mainly) the letter (e.g., alphabetic literacy), made possible the organization of the Spanish Empire in the Indies, of which the *Relaciones geográficas* are a spectacular example. Goody has made a similar point based on his knowledge of the African colonization. He has argued that "the advent of colonial regimes brought an extraordinary quantum jump apparent to anyone who has studied the documentary records of African scene over the last century" (Goody 113). The question is how to assess the relevance of literate activities in the political organization of society and of the Spanish Empire in particular. A part of

the answer could be found in the history of unity and in the social function attributed to alphabetic writing in sixteenth-century Spain.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began by contrasting and relating understanding the past and speaking the present. I also referred to a "context of descriptions" from which neither understanding the past nor speaking the present could be detached. Two kinds of contexts of description guide our understanding and our saying. One is the context we construe as members of a given culture (e.g., tradition); the other is the context we construe as practitioners of a discipline. As members of a culture, our understanding of the past is guided by the social position (class, gender, generation, etc.) to which we belong. As practitioners of a discipline, our understanding of the past is guided by our theoretical and epistemological position in the disciplinary field. Both kinds of contexts of description are, of necessity, intermingled and a constant source of dispute, changing positions and self-analysis.

From a disciplinary point of view I have attempted to understand the past by framing it in the context of literacy; at the same time I have attempted to question some of our current ways of speaking about literacy by rethinking our understanding of the past. In the context of literacy and colonization, several of the presuppositions summarized under "The Tyranny of the Alphabet" allow me to perceive the close relationship between the Spanish colonizer's actions and justifications and current scholarship in which alphabetic writing is conceived as the end of a linear evolutionary process. By thinking of communicative forms and communicative situations, oral and graphic, we also detach ourselves from our culturally-based conception of literacy (and, consequently, of literature). In the context of my previous research and publications, the understanding some of the consequences of literacy in the colonization of the New World helped me to rethink both the field of literary studies and our con-

ception of "colonial letters" (Mignolo 1986b; 1988a; Adorno 1988b).

As a member of Latin American culture I hope to have joined those who insist on conceiving Latin America as a plurilingual and multicultural society (Ballón Aguirre 1983; 1987, among others), in which the historical circumstances of "literacy and colonization" have contributed to the hegemonic role which is played today by the "Latin" component over the "Amerindian" traditions.

NOTES

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¹ Literacy and colonization in the nineteenth century has been studied from a sociological perspective by Clammer (1976). The semiotic perspective I alluded to was laid down in Mignolo (1988a and forthcoming).

² See Clendinnen (1987: 112-128) for an overall view of the Franciscan mission in the Yucatan and the role played by Diego de Landa.

³ I am thankful to Horst Pietschmann (Universität Hamburg) for bringing Reinhard's erudite and insightful article to my attention.

⁴ Skeat (1969) has reported that recent findings make the knowledge we had about how the Bible was written and circulated obsolete. After tracing a brief history of the medium of writing (papyrus and parchment) to today's codex (or book), he surmises that in "the everyday world in which earliest Christians lived, we might have expected that they would adopt as the vehicle for their literature either the parchment scroll of contemporary Judaism, or the papyrus roll universal throughout the Gentile world, or both. But in fact they did neither of these things: in this, as in other matters, the men who 'turned the world upside down' had different ideas."

⁵ Deborah Keller-Cohen (The University of Michigan) called this article to my attention.

⁶ Duverger's (1988) French translation directly from the Spanish conveys Sahagún's point of view.

⁷The same event has been reported on several occasions. See, for instance, "El orden que los religiosos tienen en enseñar a los indios la doctrina, y otras cosas de policía cristiana" (Icazbalceta 1941: 55-56)

⁸I am indebted to Bernard Teuber (Universität München) for his willingness to explain to me his point of view on this topic and for letting me read the manuscript of this article. He has studied the Renaissance grammarians' (Nebrija, Oliveira) program for finding the correspondences between the voice and the graphic sign (which they applied later to non-European languages) and has pointed out the distance between the voice and the graphic sign in picto-ideographic writing systems perceived by Fray Alonso de Molina (*Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana*, 1571).

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CHAPTER 2:
NARRATION AND ARGUMENTATION
IN THE CHRONICLES OF THE
NEW WORLD

Antonio Gómez-Moriana

(translated by Jane E. Gregg
and James V. Romano)

In Spanish historiography, the year 1492 is doubly symbolic, for it coincides not only with the crowning of a long process of national unification, but with the beginning of Spain's territorial expansion on a global scale. National unification was consummated with the armed conquest of the last Islamic bastion in Iberian lands, the Arabic kingdom of Granada, and the expulsion of the Jews by decree. The territorial expansion which would lead to the annexation of the earldoms of Rosellón and Cerdaña (1493), the occupation of the kingdom of Naples (1503), the conquest of Melilla (1497) and Orán (1509), and other incursions in Africa and would later result in the religious wars in Europe with the subjugation of the Low Countries, began with Christopher Columbus taking possession of the West Indies in the name of the sovereigns of Castile and Aragón on the twelfth of October 1492.

In this same year, the first Castilian or Spanish grammar was printed in Salamanca. Antonio de Nebrija dedicated it to Queen Isabella with words that demonstrated a national conscience and an early interpretation of the past