

SEMIOSIS, LITERATURE AND COLONIALITY: A DECOLONIAL STORY

Walter D Mignolo, Duke University, Nov 24, 2020

I understand by *semiosis* any coded sign system oral or visual to tell stories. I understand by *literature* a particular, regional and limited coded semiosis performed by means of written Latin alphabet.ⁱ Once this step was taken in the long and diverse planetary trajectories of *Sapiens Animals*, the actors of this civilization found themselves in the uncomfortable situation of having to name "oral literature" storytelling performed by mouth.ⁱⁱ I describe the simultaneous configuration of constitution/destitution "coloniality of literary semiosis" or "coloniality of literature." And by *restitution*, I mean the appropriation of colonial literary semiosis to reconstitute memories, praxis of living and storytelling that were destituted in the name of literature and history. I will elaborate these ideas reflecting on two South African narratives self-understood by their practitioner "non-fictional literature:" Njabulo Ndebele, *The Crying of Winnie Mandela* (2003) and Antjie Krog *Begging to be Black* (2011). The third case will be Algerian narrative telling the missing part of a story already told in a fictional narrative, that is, literature: Kamel Daoud, *Mersault, Contre-enquete* (2014)

ⁱ "Literature" is derived from *littera*, the unit of the Latin alphabet. So that *literature* is the regional name that a regional civilization used to denote a regional type of storytelling in graphic signs. Once this step was taken, and a sustained ground of memories and deeds was achieved, a regional civilization was formed and the wise men of that civilization called it Western civilizations (meaning to the West of Jerusalem and the North of the Mediterranean because to the South of the Mediterranean the West is called Maghreb in reference to Mecca and Medina and not to Jerusalem). While in a historical period of this civilization self-named Middle Age "littera" referred to the outcome of alphabetic writing, it was only in the eighteenth century in the chronology of this civilization that "literature" came to mean storytelling that did not happen but that were invented by the storyteller. At that point the word "fiction" was used to distinguish this type of narrative from "history" which were narrative conventionally reporting what happened. But at that point, the regional civilization in which "literature" became a standard practice, had extended itself for three centuries all over the planet. So that "literature" and "history" were storytelling *constituted* as practice and as regulation. Simultaneously, the constitution of history and literature destituted co-existing storytelling and self-conception of storytelling by the community telling stories in two ways: a) degraded them for not being written in the latin alphabet and b) by naming literature and history certain storytelling similar to what Western regional actors though literature and history shall be.

ⁱⁱ As far as we can tell the particular animal species labelled *Sapiens* has been always telling stories and telling stories is one of the features that provoked us, their heirs, to call it *Sapiens*. This animal species has different names in different languages: Runa in Kechua, Ren in Mandarin, Anthropos in Greek, *Humanus* in Latin; *Bashar* and *Ensan* in Persian). Stories has been told by sounds articulated by the tongue and the mouth and by sign inscribed by their/our hands in stones, bark of trees, papyrus and screens. The acts of storytelling imply *linguaging*--coded sounds and graphic signs by which the communal fabric of living together finds its cohesiveness. The outcome of linguaging evinces both the practical needs of linguaging but also the creativity of the *Sapiens* animals, that is, us. In the long and diverse trajectories of animal

Sapiens, the skills to tell stories increased both orally and graphically. One of these trajectories is of relevance to a specific regional practice called "literature." It presupposes a certain type of alphabetic writing: the Greco-Latin and not for example the Arabic, Persian or Cyrillic.