

The politics of literature: indexicality, circulation, and decoloniality

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes a method for literary analysis that is located at the intersection of Eliseo Verón's semiotics of circulation and the politics of literature in the wake of Jacques Rancière and Jean-François Hamel. This method takes into account the historical material conditions of textual production, as well as the historical material conditions of recognition in which interpretation occurs, thus overcoming the limits inherent to the immanentism of sociocriticism. It allows for both greater objectivity and reflexivity in analyzing signifying materialities or signs. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Verón, Peirce, and Bakhtin, the value and pertinence of the politics of literature is defended by emphasizing the importance of four main concepts: grammar, circulation, indexicality, and expressiveness. An analysis of *Haii* (1971) by J.M.G. Le Clézio illustrates the method, arguing in favor of the possible and desirable intertwinement of the politics of literature and decoloniality. Three main concepts stemming from decolonial studies are discussed in this context: codigophagy, colonial semiosis, and border thinking.

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1. Introduction

In French literary studies, for the past fifty years, sociocriticism has promoted an immanentist approach to the text, reducing its historical and material otherness to a so-called 'co-text.' Consequently, the scope of inquiry is restricted to the discursive plane, leaving no room for the analysis of the diachronic inscription of the text in society nor any place for the study

of its recognition as a mediating object circulating through space and time. However, over the past fifteen years or so, a new approach has emerged, mainly from the sociology of literature: the politics of literature. The politics of literature studies political grammars mobilized by literature as a social activity or, more analytically, systems of inscription of actors and texts in material and symbolic networks of production of meaning and perception through which literature is defined in the common sense and defended as such, whether through specific literary practices or public interventions relating to literature, its production, circulation, and reception. This relatively new theoretical framework shares some family resemblances with the semiotics of circulation developed by Eliseo Verón. I believe that a careful reconciliation of the two can be productive. Based on two seminal articles by Verón from the 1970s (Verón 1973, 1978), I aim to assess the implications and consequences of Verón's injunction to confront the text with its constitutive heteronomy, i.e., material historical contexts of production and recognition.

As a case study illustrating the relevance and operability of such an approach, I will examine *Hai* (1971), a book-length essay by the French author and literature Nobel prize winner J.M.G. Le Clézio. In it, Le Clézio asserts that he has become an 'Indian' (indigenous from Mesoamerica), a statement that has no biological basis. At the time of its publication, the book did not arouse much public anger, but in today's decolonial perspective, such an appropriationist gesture could only be denounced. The five-decade-long diachronic gap between the beginning of the circulation of the text and its contemporary conditions of recognition highlights a significant aspect of its grammar of production, namely its *patrón de poder colonial* (Quijano 2020). In other words, time has shifted our means of interpretation, providing new interpretants to receive and analyze the same text differently, i.e., according to an updated grammar of recognition. As is the case for any text or sign, its meaning has been modified over time, precisely because circulation over time generally involves shifts in political grammars between contexts.

1. Sociocriticism and its limitations

Sociocriticism is an approach in literary studies developed in France since the 1970s under the influence of New Criticism and semiotics, or more specifically, semiology (with the advances of Saussure, Benveniste, Barthes, and other French structuralists in mind). Claude Duchet first defined it as "une sémiologie critique de l'idéologie" (Duchet 1971: 14), and as such, one might think that it was also influenced by Marxism. However, it is more concerned with traces of ideologies observable in the text than with the material sociohistorical conditions from which the text arose. Among the early developers and defenders of sociocriticism in France, alongside Duchet (see Duchet and Gaillard 1976), were Edmond Cros (1988) and Pierre Zima (1981). In Québec, Marc Angenot (2004), Régine Robin, and Pierre Popovic are the most well-known

representatives of the Montreal school of sociocriticism, which still exists today. The Centre de recherche interuniversitaire en sociocritique des textes (CRIST) counts about 70 affiliated members and has been organizing a monthly seminar in Montréal since 2008, with various regular members and international guests as speakers (including the author of this paper). In Popovic's relatively recent seminal paper (2011), sociocriticism is defined anew in close connection with semiotics. Sociocritical methodology places the analysis of mediations (more precisely, one form of mediation: textualization) at its core, as it should allow to reveal, within the text, formal strategies directing the interpretation of meaning networks, whose particular productivity is to displace socially instituted normative significations. In 2021, sociocriticism officially celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by holding a congress in Paris. In the wake of the event, Bernabé Wesley directed an ambitious editorial project in which he restated the singular hypothesis that made the originality of the approach from the start: "Sociocriticism is based on the foundational theoretical hypothesis that it is in the aesthetic shaping and textual work operated upon signs, languages and social representations that meaning sediments and that an artwork gains its originality" (Wesley 2023: 7, my translation).

What is the object of sociocriticism? The answer is both simple and enigmatic: it is the sociality of texts. According to Popovic (2011), the sociality of texts is analyzable in their shaping, or *mise en forme*, which at times is also termed *semiotization*. This specific kind of semiotization refers to processes of shaping textual matter and should only be understood in relation to a broader semiotic set of signs, linguistic or otherwise. This broader set of signs is informal, but it is understood as shaping a cultural identity of which the text is a part. Thus, the study of how the two sets of signs connect (that of the text and that of the culture) would make it possible to explain the formal meaning of the text, to evaluate and appreciate its historicity, its critical scope, and capacity for invention in matters of social life.

For my part, I am very skeptical of these pretensions. As much as I appreciate the idea of investigating sign sets comparatively, to be epistemologically sound, such sets need to be clearly defined. A text can generally be viewed as a defined and stable set of signs, but a culture is not. Thus, the possibility of applying the comparative method to such an unstable set is hindered by this very flaw of the cultural semiotic set being informal. Furthermore, the given definition of the sociality of the text should be called into question since it is said to be based on the hypothesis of a connection between two sets of signs, one of which we cannot clearly enumerate the terms. Unsurprisingly, Popovic (like other proponents of sociocriticism before him) draws on an interpretive tradition that makes the most of such vague premises: *hermeneutics*.

Nevertheless, Popovic readily employs the term 'social semiosis' instead of 'co-text' to refer to the socio-discursive environment of the texts. In his eyes, sociocriticism is nothing but a reading practice attentive to the interactions between the text and the

social semiosis that surrounds it (Popovic 2011: 35). But if we are to employ semiotics in the study of literary texts in a socially informed manner, I believe we should do it the right way, that is, by considering the powerful and precise tools semiotic studies offer. Some of these better tools have been developed under the double influence of pragmatic semiotics and Marxism by Eliseo Verón, as we will see later.

One major limitation of sociocriticism is its immanentist view of the meaning of a text, based on the axiom that “the social nature of the literary work must be located and investigated within the text and not outside” (Cros 2006: n. pag.). Despite that, most sociocritics, like Cros, will say that the text is not closed in on itself and will refute any purely formalist view that denies the existence of a connection between the text and some otherness. What lies outside of the text, then? According to Duchet, there is a *co-text*, which is not to be confounded with the context. The *co-text* comprises all texts that come along the primary text; they are implied by it or called by it: “The *co-text*, that is, if you will, the notion of *edges* generalized to the entire text. At any time, there is this edge by which what is written communicates with an *outside*” (Duchet and Maurus 2011: 33–34, my translation). Duchet suggests that the co-text arises from the idea of a border always present inside the text. This implicit border is that by which the text maintains a connection with its otherness (‘an outside’). However, the co-text is contiguous to the text only in a metaphorical sense, and this imaginary border that Duchet poses only functions as long as the otherness of the text is also textual. In theory, sociocriticism cannot evade the textual prison it has built for itself – and this is true even though most proponents of sociocriticism readily reject the formalist vision of the text as being closed in on itself. If the social otherness of the text is still textual, as the term ‘co-text’ suggests, then there is nothing in this world but text.

Of course, such a vision cannot hold because there are many kinds of signs, only some of which are symbolic. Furthermore, in the symbolic subset, not all are textual, far from it. Even if we were to say, like Peirce, that “all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce 1998: 394), it would still be inaccurate to believe that all these signs making our universe are textual. The metaphor of the world as text is flawed in many ways and has always been a misleading exaggeration advanced by literary scholars to facilitate their work of interpreting the circulating symbolic goods that are literary texts. I firmly believe that we must seriously consider the diversity of signs that shape our social world. If we are to study the sociality of a text, literary or otherwise, we must reject the immanentist view, according to which any meaning a text may have emanates only from its discursive plane. Indeed, such a vision impedes our ability to acknowledge the action of other factors contributing to the interpretive process, like grammars and circulation. Texts are symbolic goods in circulation. As for any good, their material historical conditions of production and

their conditions of consumption/recognition can be discerned, and these parameters, when objectively established, give us crucial information about them.

Now, there is an approach that focuses on an absolute otherness to the text, its constitutive heteronomous sociality given by its pragmatic parameters (material and symbolical) of production, circulation, and recognition within society. This approach is called 'politics of literature.'

2. The politics of literature

Although the French term 'Politique de la littérature' (in the singular) made an early and notable prior appearance in Kristeva (1977), not before the mid-2000s has the core of the view as it is known today developed. The politics of literature (*les politiques de la littérature*) is an approach in French literary studies that has evolved over the past fifteen years or so, thanks to the seminal works of Jacques Rancière (2004, 2007), Benoît Denis (2006) and Jean-François Hamel (2014). Besides, important works were also published in the Anglosphere, including Romy Clark and Roz Ivanič's *The Politics of Writing* (1991), in which the authors develop crucial writing and reading sociopolitical aspects by drawing on Gramsci and Voloshinov. Clark and Ivanič put forth a layered theory considering the text (layer 1) as stemming from the interaction of processes of production and interpretation (layer 2), themselves dependent on a context made of social conditions of production and interpretation (layer 3) (see the diagram in Clark and Ivanič 1997: 11). This model, as we shall see, is generally consistent with Verón's views, which I will discuss in the next section.

The politics of literature studies the diverse justifications or claims (whether moral, ideological, or material) provided by the actors of literary life to justify their activity. Their examination requires connecting defined practices to value systems mobilized by the actors of these practices to make sense of them, both in their eyes and in those of their contemporaries. Such justifications relate to literature as a form of art, its utility, role, reason of being, singular mode of existence, prerogatives, and privileges, as well as powers, modes of action, and possible uses. All these parameters shape the idea of literature in the common sense and thus define the place that literature can carve out among other sectors of activity and its importance within society.

The politics of literature intersects three areas of research, each with its methods and history: the sociology of literature, cultural history, and political philosophy. With these wide roots, it deploys its understanding of literature as a specialized activity within the great social division of labor, itself dependent on established power relations, moral rules, and ideological representations. Of interest are the various forms of engagement of literary actors and their objects: form exploration, moral edification, the incarnation of a counter-power, defense of the literary institution or of a status of

exception for literature, etc. Despite their diversity, all these forms of engagement together shape the literary field and its main lines of partition (commoning and separation), which evolve over time. There is, therefore, reason to adjust our understanding of literary practices to their material historical situation, just as we should take great care to recognize the conditions in which our interpretive acts occur, taking into account each time the cultural, ideological, moral, and affective factors that influence it.

3. Grammars and circulation

In his *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein (1974) develops a framework unifying language and reality. Its four main characteristics are: philosophical grammar (1) governs the relationship between language and reality; (2) does not settle nor separate the true from the false; (3) is the verbal procedure of linguistic transactions; (4) says nothing about the psychology of the subjects who communicate (Lescourret 2020: 11). Between the world and language, philosophical grammar enables representation, which finds its end in communication. More precisely, such grammar describes the conditions of the possibility of representational logic, which allows language to communicate propositional contents describing reality. Grammatical propositions draw their meaning from the system(s) (or set(s)) of rules to which they belong. As a set of rules, grammar is arbitrary and is a projection of reality. It only provides the rules by which the representation of reality is made possible: “Understanding would be something like seeing a picture from which all the rules followed, or a picture that makes them all clear. [...] such a picture would itself be another sign, a calculus [...] Language must speak for itself” (Wittgenstein 1974: § 2).

When transposed to political philosophy, Wittgenstein’s concept of grammar can become an organizing principle (for a group or a whole society) and a condition of possibility for recognizing *common sense*, which is the fundamental condition of politics. As Kristeva puts it, politics is whatever “prescribes a *common measure* and thus brings the community into existence” (Kristeva 1977: 12, my translation, italics added). According to Rancière,

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. (Rancière 2004: 10)

This very definition of politics as based on what is sharable from the point of view of experience (common sense, necessitating a common measure) leads Rancière

to define the politics of literature as being “involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world” (Rancière 2004: 10). The politics of literature thus highlights how literary works and literary life are “enabling words with the power of framing a common world” (Rancière 2004: 13). This enabling, I suggest, is made possible through political grammars.

In *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to Adam Smith, who, in 1759, proposed that the rules of justice could be compared to the rules of grammar. According to the authors, grammars provide formulas generally applicable to all situations, which validate the customary rules, procedures, agreements, and laws in their local application. By transposing this concept in turn to the politics of literature, Hamel writes:

If the politics of literature emanate from the literary field, they also assume the appropriation of certain representations circulating in the social space and structuring the political imaginary. To define these exogenous systems, which are the subject of transposition into the literary domain, we will speak of ‘political grammars,’ meaning *a set of rules that organize the convergence of political actors’ representations, practices, and experiences*. (Hamel 2014: 21, my translation, italics added)

Political grammars are not universals but historically situated conventions, more or less explicit and effective (both materially and symbolically), which differ from one social space to another and change over time, with the conservation and forcing operations that such metapragmatic changes suppose.

To conceive of the shifts in sensibility throughout time and space, groups, and individual actors, Verón (1978) applies the notion of grammar to the two poles of communication: sender and receiver, or to use his terms, which are informed by Marxism: production and recognition.¹ Verón sees the gap between grammars of production and grammars of recognition as the locus where a social work of investment of signifying materialities takes place:

¹ Verón specifies that the act by which a sign (or a text) in circulation is received cannot be described as a mere ‘consumption’ as is the case for any material good. A text is a symbolic good that calls for consumption of a special kind involving a series of cognitive, cultural, and social factors shaping its conditions of recognition (see Verón 1978: 8). The term ‘recognition’ preferred by Verón brings the function associated with the receiving pole closer to the complex interpretive act implied in ‘reception,’ theorized in the same era by Hans Robert Jauss (1982). ‘Recognition’ is also an important concept on which Axel Honneth (1992) has worked extensively a few years later. It is noteworthy that Honneth’s book is subtitled *The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, once again emphasizing the importance of the concept of grammar.

The gap between production and recognition is extremely variable, depending on the level of operation of production of meaning where we stand and the type of signifying set we study. In any case, we always deal with two kinds of ‘grammars’: ‘grammars’ of production and ‘grammars’ of recognition. However, properly speaking, there are no traces of circulation: the circulation aspect can only be made ‘visible’ in the analysis as a gap, precisely, between the two sets of traces, those of production and those of recognition. The concept of *circulation* is but the name of this gap. (Verón 1978: 10, my translation)

Between the intended meaning and the interpreted sign, it is the gap, or difference arising from circulation, that is meaningful. But this circulation – or semiosis, really – implies a diachrony, and with it comes an inevitable transformation of meaning due to the disparity in contexts and grammars.

At least since Shannon (1948), a distinction has been made between two poles in communication: the sending end and the receiving end. Jakobson (1960) refined our understanding of this pre-established knowledge by adding four other components (context, message, contact, code) and their respective functions (referential, poetic, phatic, metalinguistic), in addition to the emotive and conative functions associated with the addresser and the addressee. But because this model, which stems from structural linguistics, sees verbal language as the sole basis with which we may interpret any phenomena of the world, and because it assumes the primacy of linguistic activity over all other forms of exchange (human or otherwise), it is prone to critique, and rightly so (for a thorough critique of glottocentrism, see Petrilli 2014). To avoid this epistemological trap, as Verón suggested, we can compare, or assimilate, the signifying production (more often called *meaning-making* in today’s semiotics) to the Marxist economic model according to which “every production bears the traces of the productive system that generated it” (Verón 1978: 17, my translation; see also Verón 1973 about ideology understood in this sense). Signs, or “signifying materialities” in Verón’s terminology, carry *traces* that allow us to link – or *index* – them to their context and conditions of production. But these traces can also be muted or obliterated through various means for the benefit of reification. I suggest that denying the existence of the constitutive heteronomy of the text, i.e., purposefully or unknowingly ignoring the historical material conditions of literary acts (writing, reading) and their grammar, leads precisely to reification. On the contrary, insisting on the text’s inherently indexical dimension allows for a more accurate and more profound interpretation of it by making its material conditions visible and unavoidable.

Traces are signs of the indexical type. In Peirce’s semiotic typology, an indexical sign is a sign that connects a representamen (a phenomenon manifesting itself to cognition) and its object (that to which it refers, its objective signification) in a relationship

of contiguity or causality (e.g., the imprint left on the ground by an animal's hoof indicating the previous passage of a hoofed animal). In Bakhtin's metalinguistics, the verbal sign is understood as the product of human intersubjectivity. Situated enunciative expressivity is correlated with the constitutive indexicality of the speech act. Indices of subjectivation (sociohistorical determinations, grammatical conditioning, lexical appropriations, aesthetic shaping) in the speech act are mainly conveyed by enunciative expressiveness, indexing a defined system of values, or political grammar. Expressivity colors verbal signs: it gives them their indexical quality, by which they point towards a real material historical enunciative context and towards the writer himself, or more precisely towards the relationship of value which unites the writer to the utterance (see Bakhtine 1984: 329). In the semiotic anthropology of the Chicago School, indexicality refers to the relation connecting an agent and the social such as this agent manifests signs (verbal, behavioral, ethical) that relate him to society in a type-token relationship, where the type is a macrosocial generality, and the occurrence the material or actual effect of this generality, manifest at the microsocal (interactional) scale. The ethnographer or sociologist, when analyzing the (sociolinguistic) behaviors of an agent, will say that the agent is *indexed* to a specific socialization. According to Michael Silverstein, 'indexical order' is "the concept necessary to showing us how to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon" (Silverstein 2003: 193). In the metapragmatic perspective proposed by Silverstein, the creative effect of indexicality (as it can be observed from the signs emitted, produced, or that can be attached to an agent) is the motivated realization (or performance) of a preexisting set of semiotic values (social imaginary, ideology, etc.) legitimized by its actualization (on semiotic ideology, see Keane 2018).

Verón saw this quite clearly, it seems, when he wrote:

Between the meaning invested and the conditions of this investment, between the signifying materialities and the constraints defining the nature of the investment work, lies the *agents* of processes of production and recognition: the *subjects*. [...] However, the subject is not a 'transparent milieu,' far from it. (Verón 1978: 19, my translation; on the 'glassy essence' of the subject, see also Peirce 1892)

Insisting on studying traces, semiotics of circulation valorizes indexical analysis, thus the connection of signs to their concrete historical material contexts and related political grammars. In literary analysis, the context is the text's constitutive heteronomy, which should not be reified as a mere 'co-text' or any metaphorical archive. Moreover, the conditions of recognition, to which situated interpretation is indexically connected, should be reflexively thought of. As Verón argues:

Any analysis of a signifying set, whatever the signifying materiality(ies) in play, is necessarily *heteronomous*. *The meaning produced becomes visible only in contrast with the productive system that generated it, i.e., when connected to an “elsewhere” shaped by the conditions of production, circulation, and recognition.* (Verón 1978: 12, my translation)

Now, how can this model help us understand concrete signifying materialities, such as literary texts? In the following section, I analyze an essay by Le Clézio from 1971. In doing so, I argue for a specific kind of literary analysis that puts the conceptual framework of Verón’s semiotics of circulation at the service of the politics of literature. Its principal merit is that it allows me to carry out a decolonial reading of the text in question.

4. Le Clézio in the eye of decoloniality

A part of my research focuses on the positioning of writers stemming from hegemonic cultures but adopting a subaltern, marginal, or decentered point of view or ethos. Even if they can be shocking, the socio-aesthetic effects of such positioning are often complex and more nuanced than one might first imagine. The Franco-Mauritian writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio is a figure of such positioning. In his way, he has worked towards cultural mixing from a critical, anti-racist, and intercultural perspective. However, his political incarnation in French literary life is not without scandals, and he has often earned criticism. His approach to other cultures is made of both appropriation and clumsiness, as well as a genuine desire for reciprocal political emancipation, tinged with curiosity and respect for others. However, in light of decoloniality, I believe that a critical examination of his early attempts in this way is warranted.

What is decoloniality? To answer this, we need first to define cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation was first defined in 1976 by Kenneth Coutts-Smith, a defender of the Inuit people. Coutts-Smith (1991) intersects the Marxist notion of class appropriation and that of cultural colonialism to highlight the way Western culture appropriates the cultural forms of oppressed or colonized people. Cultural appropriation relates to how signs of a dominated culture are decontextualized, distorted, or reified by a dominant culture. As Uzel (2019: 11) signals, the dominant classes and states always tend to negate or be blind to their appropriationist tendencies. The most common strategy to defuse artistic controversies linked to cultural appropriation is for the artist to rely on their dominant position to defend an approach claiming to valorize the dominated culture. Against this, the decolonial paradigm asserts that cultures are not on equal footing, for it is evident that relationships of dominance persist on a global scale despite acquired political independencies. From a decolonial standpoint,

coloniality exists well beyond state political subordination: it has roots in the imaginary, in systems of belief and knowledge. This is precisely what I would like to explore with my case study, thus highlighting a crucial part of its conditions of production. However, I do not intend to ‘cancel’ Le Clézio by reducing him to a colonist (even though his father directly took part in the British colonial system as a field doctor in Nigeria; see Le Clézio 2004). I aim to examine the implications of the writer’s appropriationist gesture on the imaginary plane of coloniality.

Between 1970 and 1974, for several months each year during the rainy season, Le Clézio went to Panama, in the Darién ecoregion, where he stayed with an Emberá community (see Levesque 2022). By the end of the 1960s, the writer is experiencing a major existential, spiritual, and literary crisis. His books are not selling; he won the Renaudot prize when he was just 23 years old, but he is now 30, and his thoughts are stagnating. He wants to escape Western culture, loathing its excessive reflexivity, vanity, and elitism. As an alternative to compulsory French military service, he enrolled as a ‘coopérant’ and, after a brief stay in Thailand in 1967, he was stationed in Mexico in 1968. From there, he visited Panama, where some Emberás he met by chance invited him to stay with them in an indigenous reserve (*comarca indígena*).

The group that Le Clézio joined lived on the Río Tuquesa. Traditionally, the Emberá people live from fishing, hunting, horticulture, and foraging. They expertly winnow baskets adorned with colorful designs, sometimes very elaborate. Their stilt houses are open, round, and covered with a conical thatched roof made from palm leaves. These are built two meters high and away from the shore to prevent excessive floods from reaching their floor; you climb there using a ladder. The village economy is community-based: private property does not exist for land, and hunting game is shared among community members. Of course, since the 1960s, at least, many Western products have entered the daily lives of the Emberá: outboard motors, kerosene lamps, hunting rifles, casseroles, manufactured clothing, etc. So, when Le Clézio stayed with them, they were no longer completely isolated from the modern world. In fact, the presence of the Emberá people in the Darién region results from colonization since they were previously settled further south on the continent. The Kuna people inhabited the isthmus at the time of first contact with the Spanish settlers. Later, the Emberá settled there under the pressure of European colonial activity in the Amazon, pushing the Kuna north of the isthmus and on the San Blas archipelago. The Emberá do not have an organized religion but believe in *haii* (or *jai* in Spanish) spirits; shamanism (*jaibanismo*) is a fundamental component of their social and spiritual life.

And that’s where the title of Le Clézio’s book, *Haii*, comes from. It suggests a double entendre on the Emberá word for spirit and the French verb ‘hair’ (to hate). In this book, the writer contrasts ‘American Indian’ culture with ‘Western culture.’ He shares his hatred of Western art’s reflexivity and wonders at Emberá’s craftsmanship.

Here, I will limit my analysis of *Haiï* to its first part only. Since the book is from 1971, it mainly testifies to the writer's first contact with the Emberá and Meso-american cultural landscape. His relationship will evolve over time. I do not wish to be accused of bad faith, so I should clarify that my objective is solely to show how, in the first part of this somewhat peremptory work, Le Clézio reconducts modern Western archetypes, i.e., a specific colonial imaginary, through his gaze and descriptions. I intend to show (1) the Western-centrism implied by the clash of cultures he draws, (2) the essentialism of the Leclézian gaze, and (3) the semiotic reductionism operated by the writer – so many aspects participating in colonial semiosis. The deliberately limited scope of my analysis should not overshadow Le Clézio's later works and commitments towards interculturality and minority people (about that, see Ravoux-Rallo 1987, Bouvet 2012, Thibault 2015, Guest 2017). Levesque (2020) details how the 1970-1974 period led to a significant transformation in Leclézian poetics.

4.1. A mistaken disparity in semiotic consciousness

In *Haiï*, Le Clézio assumes a first-person voice of which the attribution and authenticity make no doubt (on ethos attribution, see Korthals Altes 2014). We are in the regime of essay, not fiction. Here is how the book begins: “Je ne sais pas trop comment c'est possible, mais c'est ainsi: je suis un Indien.” (Le Clézio 1987: 5, hereafter ‘H’) This quite clearly suggests identity appropriation.² Then, constructing a cultural opposition based on distinct semiotic ideologies, on the one hand, Western signs are assimilated to fecal matter, to a rejection; on the other hand, Emberá signs are integrated into ritualistic life and seen as participating in daily creativity. Westerners would have unlearned to *see signs*: “Le regard n'est rien d'autre que la lecture des signes. Mais quand les signes ont cessé d'apparaître, que faire de ses yeux?” (H: 28) But to think that the Emberá have a special connection with signs that Westerners would have lost is mistaken: it is the writer who suddenly sees all these unfamiliar signs. His position is thus highlighted: finding himself in a radically new situation, he cannot help but entertain an exacerbated semiotic consciousness. The writer could not distinguish between his gaze and the gaze of those he observed.³ However, it is the gaze of the writer that shapes the representation, while the writing presents things as though they were objectively such.

Later on, Le Clézio writes: “Les Indiens ont en eux des milliers d'années de connaissance, et c'est pour cela que leur science est si parfaite. Leur monde n'est pas

² And of course, the term ‘Indian’ to designate Native Americans is incorrect and today proscribed.

³ This is akin to the well-known ethnographic *emic* vs *etic* distinction.

différent du nôtre, simplement ils l’habitent, tandis que nous sommes encore en exil.” (H: 36) Here, the idealization of indigenous science is apparent, but it is done to the detriment of Western science, as if one and the other had to be hierarchized. Sure, Le Clézio overturns the hierarchy by stating the superiority of Emberá science, but he bases himself on a mythological criterion which once again betrays his Western-centric position. This “nous sommes encore en exil” is reminiscent of the myth of the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were rejected. In his eye, Westerners are sinners because of their knowledge, while the Emberá still inhabit Eden. In short, they are *noble savages* for him. What an irony, knowing that the Emberá were driven from their southern lands towards the Panamanian isthmus by European settlers: they are literally exiles!

4.2. The essentialism of the Leclezian gaze

These ‘savages’ are not only good but also beautiful. The writer sees in the natural harmony of their bodies an indictment against the Western culture of waste:

Voilà un peuple qui ne mange pas à sa faim, qui est privé presque continuellement des ingrédients de base de la diététique moderne : pas de viande, pas de lait, pas de légumes, pas de fruits. Seulement, d’un jour à l’autre, d’une année à l’autre, l’âpre plantain vert. De temps à autre, un peu de viande de cerf ou de pécaré, un iguane, un perroquet. Du riz, du maïs. Et tout cela a pu produire des corps aussi harmonieux, aussi forts, aussi endurants? Il y a là comme un défi à notre propre race, à nos goûts dispendieux, à nos soucis alimentaires. Nous, les mangeurs de viande, les buveurs de lait, les dévoreurs de vitamines. Nous, qui dévorons tant de richesses que nous ne pouvons les distribuer dans le monde, aux peuples en famine, aux enfants mal nourris. Et ces peuples, eux, se vengent, simplement, en étant beaux. (H: 20–21)

Such sweet revenge. Against pillaging, population displacements, and all the horrors of colonization, the Emberá have beauty for themselves.

If Le Clézio reduces the natives to their physical beauty – a sinister consolation prize – he is even more reductive when he describes Emberá women. Indeed, he talks abundantly of the “beauté de la nubilité des femmes” (H: 21). Through his descriptions, we appreciate the whole patriarchal background of coloniality, of which his text appears as a mediation:

La beauté indienne [...] est là, seulement, triomphale, vibrante, brillance externe qui n'a d'autre raison que l'attraction sexuelle, puis la fécondité. [...] Il semble qu'elles portent, avec leur beauté, la vérité de leur race, son ordre de survie. La beauté brille en elles, sur leur peau, sur leurs visages, dans leur chevelure, les signes de salut de l'espèce humaine tout entière. Illustration de la nature même, comme le sont les oiseaux, les fleurs, les feuilles, les insectes. Apparues sans rupture, sans déchirement, entre les autres formes vivantes sur la terre. Apparues non pour détruire ou pour dominer, mais pour respirer, pour manger, boire, pour nourrir, pour aimer et faire croître la vie dans leurs ventres. (H: 21, 24)

Here, the 'Indian beauty' is reduced to the reproductive functions of the female. This beauty is a radical 'truth' and a symptom of the state of survival in which the Emberá people have been maintained since colonization. It is an "illustration of nature itself," therefore not a mediation, as opposed to that of Western women, which is thought of as reflexive and leading us astray from "the salvation of the human species." The ideas of a 'tear' or 'rupture' connote the exile from Eden once again. Finally, Emberá women would have 'appeared' on Earth "not to destroy or dominate" (unlike Western women?) Emberá women 'appeared' – notice the strange verb that evokes a fantasy — "to breathe, eat, drink, feed, love, and to grow life in their womb." Thus, these women are entirely reduced to their maternal role. Lacking any individual traits, no personality drives them that could derail this biological program.

4.3. Cultural reductionism and semiotic obfuscation

By putting cultures back-to-back, Le Clézio makes outrageous comparisons. For example, he opposes Western art (with the system it supposes) and Emberá craftsmanship, which he sees as entirely functional and in no way representational. The writer makes a series of categorical statements when speaking about Emberá art: it is not a specialized social activity, it is totally transitive, and in no way is it meant to entertain. Obfuscating its semiotic complexity, Le Clézio makes Emberá art an entirely performative and non-figurative system: "Fête magique, théâtre commun. Il n'y a pas d'acteurs, pas de public. Tous ces insignes, tous ces traits, [...] tous ces gestes [...] : ils ne sont pas séparés, ils ne sont pas oubliés" (H: 40). This idea is akin to Cratylism, which sees in the arbitrariness of the sign the mark of a disconnect with the divine origin of the world, and the terrestrial corruption that follows. 'Indians,' according to the author, have not lost this connection: their art is not separated from daily life and, therefore, has not forgotten its *motivation*. Le Clézio misunderstands the Emberá art system to the extent of denying it any reflexive or critical dimension. Its sole effect would be to maintain the cohesion of the group. Incidentally, he subsumes it entirely under the regime of magic:

Les indiens ne représentent pas la vie, ils n'ont pas besoin d'analyser les événements. Au contraire, ils vivent les représentations des mystères, ils suivent les traces peintes, ils parlent, mangent, s'aiment et s'unissent selon les indications que donne la magie. Art enfin, art réellement, et non plus misérables interrogations de l'individu devant le monde. Art, puisque l'art est l'impression de l'univers sur le groupe humain, et la filiation de chaque cellule à l'ensemble. (H: 37)

In contrast with the supposedly unified magic of the indigenous group, Le Clézio sees in Western art a disconnect caused by an excess in reflexivity and specialization in mediation. Of course, this dichotomy doesn't hold water. Le Clézio significantly underestimates the freedom of the Emberá regarding their belief system. Denying the critical reflexive capacity of the Emberá with regard to signs implies intellectual superiority for Westerners. However, reflexivity is perceived by the writer as a damnation. In the Garden of Eden, reflexivity has no place: Adam and Eve do not look at each other, they "do not represent life, they do not need to analyze events." Their ignorance is bliss. Le Clézio seems nostalgic for a paradise lost, which he believes he found anew in the Darién.

Because it relies on a Christian interpretant emanating from a Western belief system foreign to that of the Emberá, the author's understanding of the culture of his hosts can only be misleading. Furthermore, the writer positions himself as a victim in this affair. The exile is him! While idealizing the Emberá, he thinks of himself as coming from a torn culture, which has lost its values by sinking into reflexivity. In light of all this, it is clear to me that *Hai* is a text constructed on what Aníbal Quijano calls a *patrón de poder colonial* (Quijano 2020), a colonial model of power. The study of indexicality allows this interpretation by linking the text to a specific material historical socialization inherent to its conditions of production and the political grammar instantiated through its expression. But it is the circulation that makes this interpretation more readily understandable. The five decades-long diachronic gap makes salient the evolution of political grammars and historical shifts in sensibility between the original conditions of production and the current conditions of recognition.

5. Appropriation and decoloniality

In this final section, to deepen my case study, I will discuss three main concepts from decolonial studies developed by semioticians: codigophagy, colonial semiosis, and border thinking. These decolonial concepts have appeared over the last thirty years and nourish a new political grammar, in light of which the conditions of recognition of *Hai* are today updated.

5.1. Codigophagy

Códigofagia, or codigophagy, is a semiotic concept developed by Bolívar Echeverría. It refers to the (metaphorical) act of feeding on code. Every community and every culture has codes; a culture itself can be seen as one vast code. According to Echeverría, miscegenation between cultures is natural and inevitable. He conceives this dynamic as a semiotic process involving an inescapable power dimension by which codes compete. To maintain itself and gain ascendancy, a given code appropriates what, belonging to another code, is likely to strengthen it. As he puts it:

Las subcodificaciones o configuraciones singulares y concretas del código de lo humano no parecen tener otra manera de coexistir entre sí que no sea la del devorarse las unas a las otras; la del golpear destructivamente en el centro de simbolización constitutivo de la que tienen enfrente y apropiarse e integrar en sí, sometiéndose a sí mismas a una alteración esencial, lo restos aún vivos que quedan de ella después. (Echeverría 1996: 83)

Echeverría sees the mark of this dynamic in Spanish-American colonial cultural history: colonized peoples took advantage of codigophagy to maintain themselves despite their ruin by European institutions. Conversely, the colonial powers assimilated to their advantage parts of the code of the decimated peoples, i.e., appropriated them. I propose to understand codigophagy as a kind of non-consensual intercultural dialogue.

5.2. Colonial semiosis

Colonial semiosis is a concept developed by Walter D. Mignolo. Mignolo (2005) invites us to ponder how, from a historical perspective, colonization constituted “a particular system of interactions” profoundly affecting the American area in its semiosis, i.e., in its “interactions through different systems of signs” (Mignolo 2005: n. pag.).

El concepto de “semiosis colonial” [...] señala las fracturas, las fronteras, y los silencios que caracterizan las acciones comunicativas y las representaciones en situaciones coloniales, al mismo tiempo que revela la precariedad hermenéutica del sujeto que se da por tarea su conocimiento y/o comprensión. (Ibid.)

Mignolo's thought is rooted in Peircean semiotics. Peircean semiotics works based on a triadic sign of which one term is the interpretant.⁴ The nature of the interpretant implies that the interpretation takes into account the situation in which the signs or statements are received, i.e., their conditions of recognition. As Mignolo explains:

El concepto de "semiosis colonial" trae al primer plano el siguiente dilema [...]: ¿cuál es el *locus enunciativo* desde el cual el sujeto de la comprensión comprende situaciones coloniales? ¿En otras palabras, en cuál de las tradiciones que se quiere comprender se inscribe el sujeto de la comprensión? Por cierto que preguntas tan amplias como éstas no son sólo relevantes cuando se trata de situaciones coloniales o de semiosis colonial, sino también de problemas más específicos como los de raza, género, o clase semiosis [...] (Ibid.)

Decolonial thought invites us to consider the enunciative subject's position and maintain a reflexive relationship regarding our own enunciative position as speakers. Above all, we must refrain from deluding ourselves about the possibility of any position of neutrality in studying cultures and cultural interactions.

Asymmetry in interlocution is a factor to consider in the dialogic production of meaning. Interculturalism must not leave room for postcolonial irenicism that views cultures as dialoguing on an equal footing. From a decolonial perspective, *interlocution* – and the dialogic intersubjectivity that comes with it – is more significant than any attempt to establish an objective semiotic relationship between language and the world. The latter generally relates to and participates in an epistemological model whose cultural and historical situation is obfuscated in favor of claims of universality. In contrast, the former produces intermediate, dialogical signs: it proceeds from intersemiotic translation and adjustment.

5.3. Border thinking

In *Hai*, Le Clézio writes: "La rencontre avec le monde Indien n'est plus un luxe aujourd'hui. C'est devenu une nécessité pour qui veut comprendre ce qui se passe dans le monde moderne." (H: 11) This passage highlights the underlying motivations of the intercultural encounter carried out and chronicled by the writer. It was never about understanding indigenous people, only himself. By visiting the Emberá world, he wishes to understand Western modernity. The motive is obvious, and in such circumstances, it is quite easy to see how appropriation and codigophagy fit into the scheme.

⁴ The interpretant is a means, not a person, although in some situations both converge.

That being said, Le Clézio seems aware that he is only speaking of himself through his depiction of the Emberá: “ces pages écrites pour parler de gens dont la grande vertu est d’être inaccessibles et silencieux, ne savent parler, malheureusement, que de leur auteur” (H: 5–6). From a Bakhtinian point of view, taking dialogism as a model of true intersubjective communication (Bakhtin 2010) and informed as we are by the contemporary decolonial interpretant — emphasizing the significance of the diachronic gap produced by circulation and the shifts in political grammars over time —, the main problem *Haï* presents to us today is that *it does not constitute a genuine dialogue*. It does not let us hear the voices of indigenous people. The text only lets us hear one voice, and it is that of a Western writer who finds an opportunity for profound defamiliarization in an indigenous Mesoamerican group. At first, it was a culture shock, but over time, this would lead to acculturation and serve as a springboard for a renewal of his poetics, tangible in his later production, especially in *Voyages de l’autre côté* (1975) and *L’inconnu sur la Terre* (1978). Le Clézio has publicly (in his books and interviews) described how much he imbibed the semiotic environment he was immersed in during his prolonged stays with the Emberá. He has been sensible to their peculiar voice and rites and how they relate to language. From this point of view, can we speak of cultural and artistic appropriation or even say that Le Clézio is an appropriationist artist? I doubt it. Nevertheless, as a clumsy first approach to minority people, *Haï* is a testament to the writer’s Western upbringing and a mark of his colonial unconscious.

If we stick to observing the form of his statement, which I quoted above – “That’s how it is: I am an Indian” – instead of cultural appropriation, we should consider a kind of *identity poaching*” (see Beauclair 2018). The idea of identity poaching is similar to that of border thinking (*pensamiento fronterizo*) developed by Mignolo (2015). Mignolo conceives the border and the semiotic interactions it implies through the model of the semiosphere theorized by Juri Lotman (2005) in cultural semiotics. The relationships between a center and its periphery, reflected in the semiosphere model, intersect with the partition between dominant and dominated cultures in decolonial thought. On the one hand, the center appropriates from the periphery, of which it feeds to maintain itself, i.e., codigophagy.

On the other hand, the periphery deploys its creativity to escape the capture of the center. Between the two, a thick and porous border gives rise to operations of dialectic translation, i.e., *border thinking*. If carried out from the dominated periphery, cultural or identity poaching can be seen as a tactic to destabilize the universalizing cultural hegemony of the centric institutions of meaning. Conversely, if it is operated from the dominating center, as with *Haï*, then it simply corresponds to a modality of cultural appropriation.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented a method for literary analysis at the intersection of Marxist-informed sociosemiotics and the politics of literature. My method circumvents a major epistemological flaw of sociocriticism, namely its immanentist conception of meaning and sociality as emanating strictly from the discursive plane of the text. Relying on Eliseo Verón's semiotics of circulation, I argued in favor of taking into account the conditions of production and recognition of the text, which constitute two sets of signifying materialities between which a gap, or difference, inevitably appears. Meaning is the name we give to what that gap causes in the act of interpretation. I deepened my understanding of this semiotic causation by examining the part political grammars play in the production of meaning, drawing on Wittgenstein, and the importance of indexicality and expressiveness in this regard, drawing on Peirce and Bakhtin, respectively. These theoretical considerations allowed me to unify and leverage the powerful conceptual tools offered by the politics of literature, the semiotics of circulation, and decoloniality. To show their operationality, I developed a case study – *Hai* (1971) by J.M.G. Le Clézio – that also allowed me to illustrate the potential of the method in question and to assert the relevance of such a critical approach combining material semiotics, literary studies, and decolonial studies. I think the method is reproducible, not only for literary analysis but for any text whose concrete heteronomy has a determining impact on its signifying materiality.

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