Remapping Writing: Indigenous Writing and Cultural Conflict in Brazil

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In the formulation of its present Constitution in 1988, the Brazilian nation chose to put an end to centuries of disrespect and marginalization of its indigenous populations by officially recognizing the existence of indigenous languages and cultures within the boundaries of the nation and by recognizing the rights of its indigenous peoples to full citizenship and political representation. This historic recognition was followed up later, in 1996, by one of the potentially most critical instruments for implementing this new found respect for the indigenous in Brazil, namely the creation of a new indigenous education policy and the establishment of the indigenous school. The official buzz-words used to describe the new policy and the new school system were "bilingual" and "intercultural"; as such, their primary objectives were the "recuperation of their historical memories, the reaffirmation of their ethnic identities and the valorization of their languages and sciences", all this besides "guaranteeing to the Indians, their communities and their peoples, access to information, technical and scientific knowledge of the national society and other indigenous and non-indigenous societies."[1] The new policy allowed each indigenous community to have its own "bilin-

1 National Education Law (LDB) 1996, Article 78, paragraph VII.

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gual and intercultural" school and to make its own decisions as to medium of instruction, content, pedagogy and curriculum, with the interference of the state in a merely advisory capacity.

Previous constitutions had denied full citizenship to the indigenous populations, attributing to them the status of wards of the State. Schooling had existed in indigenous areas, but with no specific legislation, it followed the norms of non-indigenous rural schools and was generally run by local authorities or by missionaries. Far from being "bilingual and intercultural," these older schools implemented policies of varying degrees of outright cultural and linguistic assimilation.

In spite of the obvious radical differences between the policies of today and those of yesteryear, a common element to both is *literacy.* In other words, in both cases the school is seen as the place for the dissemination and production of *written* knowledge, be it in the indigenous language of the community concerned or the national language, Portuguese.

In spite of the well meaning official "indigenous turn" and the newly-established physical, institutional and discursive space of the indigenous school, conflicts persist on both sides; perhaps forseeably, these conflicts appear to stem from what constitutes indigenous knowledge. Given the amplitude of this problematic, I shall concentrate my discussion here on some of the conflicts related specifically to *writing* as emblematic of the problematic aspects of this recent official commitment to indigenous knowledge in Brazil, and its purported claims to valorize indigenous[2] languages and cultures.

If this commitment and its policies are taken as indicative of the need to remap the history and place of contact between the nation and its indigenous communities, then I propose to read writing as a *map* of the conflicts involved in this re-mapping process.

One of the most palpable results of the new policies has been the recent surge in the publication of written narratives and other school-related materials, mainly in Portuguese, in general collectively authored by members of the various indigenous communities.[3] Significantly, a large proportion (if

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2 The indigenous population of Brazil is estimated at around 400,000 (part of a total population of 160 million), distributed into 210 indigenous "peoples" or "nations," speaking an estimated 180 indigenous languages (Lopes da Silva, A. 2003). For the purposes of this paper, where my aim is to discuss issues related to conflicts in the concept of indigenous knowledge between indigenous communities on one hand and the non-indigenous Nation, on the other, I take on the risk of not calling enough attention to the specificities of each individual indigenous culture.

3 For a further analysis of these texts see Menezes de Souza 2001.

not the majority) of these texts is produced by groups of indigenous adults undertaking Indigenous Teacher Education courses, with the purpose of producing previously unavailable written materials to disseminate indigenous knowledge to be used in the new indigenous schools.

In general, like the courses, these materials tend to be produced under the tutelage of Brazilian non-indigenous, monolingual specialists, for the most part, linguists and anthropologists. Besides being in Portuguese, a large proportion of these written materials is *multimodal* in nature; that is, they contain a high degree of visual texts (mainly colored drawings) which accompany the written alphabetic texts, though the relationship between the alphabetic and the written may not always be clear.

Finally, a word on my own locus of enunciation: the South American theorist Mignolo (2000) writes of the postcolonial need to engage in what he calls "border thinking" as a means to change the colonial balance of power in knowledge production. As Mignolo describes it, from the colonial perspective, "legitimate" knowledge is what was produced *in* the metropolitan centers of previous (?) colonial power, even when this knowledge was *about* aspects of knowledge or cultures on the colonized peripheries; in opposition to this, Mignolo propounds "border thinking" as a strategy for knowledge-production *from* the peripheries, not only as means of no longer permitting "them" to speak *for* "us," but also as a means of legitimating "our" capacity for the production of knowledge in the so-called global peripheries.

In a postcolonial settler nation such as Brazil, the "them"/"us" centre/periphery dichotomies are far from clear; if from one perspective, Brazil is seen as the "Third World" periphery in relation to an external "First-World, metropolitan, centre," from the Brazilian national perspective, centered on the urban industrial Eurocentric south-east, indigenous cultures and communities are seen as located on the albeit internal peripheries of the nation. Located, as I am in a national academic institution in the Brazilian south-east, I inevitably write *both* from a peripheral perspective in relation to the so-called Eurocentric First-World, *and* from a central metropolitan perspective in relation to the indigenous cultures which are the focus of my research. I am therefore caught between the "indigenize!" strategy discussed by Findlay (2004), in a top-down academic stance in relation to indigenous cultures, and the "decolonization" strategy, sought by Smith (1999) which locates itself in a "bottom-up" stance, "writing back" to the academies of the "centre", including my own. I write therefore from the "third space" of the contact zone under the sign of contamination from both Eurocentric national and trans-national knowledges *and* from the indigenous knowledges I have had access to.

Indigenous Knowledge

A common denominator in definitions of indigenous knowledge is the emphasis given to the highly contextualized nature of such forms of knowledge, their connection to place, and the need to avoid judgments as to their worth or truth-value. Thus Semali & Kinchloe (1999) define indigenous knowledge as "everyday rationalization that rewards individuals who live in a given locality" (3) and Sefa Dei et al (2000) define it as the sum of experience and knowledge of a given social group. In fact, both of these definitions could be applied to the knowledge of any culture or group, "indigenous" or not.[4] The crucial point in defining indigenous knowledges seems to be the recognition of their place-based locus of production and use in communities ethnically distinct and socio-historically distant from national centers of political and economic power. This characteristic appears to be metonymically represented by the prefix "ethno-" and the ease with which it is attached to these knowledges, carrying with it a connotation of negative or reduced worth.

Bhabha (1996) shows how, even in societies which purport to attribute *equal respect* to the cultures of minority communities within a nation, the fact that these cultures are limited in extent, in comparison with the national culture (i.e., by virtue of their "localness") causes them to be granted equal respect but not *equal worth.* In spite of the "indigenous turn" in recent Brazilian policy, this appears to be very much the case in Brazil, as I hope to show below.

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Indigenous Knowledge and Writing

As mentioned above, the recent bilingual and intercultural indigenous education policies in Brazil and the establishment of indigenous schools, tends to occur under the tutelage of monolingual, non-indigenous specialists, generally linguists or anthropologists, well-meaningly conscious of the objectives of the new policy to preserve and protect indigenous languages and cultures. With this in mind, these specialists are keen to see as much of indigenous knowledge and language written down for posterity and to be disseminated in the indigenous schools. Writing, from this perspective, is seen as an innocuous, transparent technology and an essential instrument for the preservation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge; however, conflicts arise in the different perceptions of writing held by the indigenous

4 See Chakrabarty 1992 for a discussion of how certain knowledges ceased to see themselves as "local" and became "universal."

cultures and by their non-indigenous tutors, and this becomes especially apparent in the multimodal texts produced as a result of this conflictual contact.

These texts with a highly visual component tend to be seen by the non-indigenous tutors as pictographs or a primitive stage of alphabetic literacy; primitive because, as the Eurocentric theories of writing go (Elkins), pictographs are supposedly merely mnemonic; seen as mere *aide-memoires,* pictographs supposedly require completion by oral explanation, are dependent on previous knowledge and are therefore incomplete, context-bound and lack independence; in contrast, alphabetic texts are self contained, context-free and independent. Embedded in this view of the primitiveness of pictographs is the Eurocentric belief that it was only with the development of alphabetic writing that the Greeks were able to develop philosophy, the concept of law, and the concept of justice; purportedly, this was because once written, previously spoken ephemeral thoughts now registered and fixed on paper, and distanced from the immediacy of their context of occurrence, could become the object of sophisticated contemplation. As such, responsibility is attributed to alphabetic writing for the development of abstract, rational decontextualized thought.

As Mignolo (2000) says, with this belief arose the Eurocentric notion that philosophy began in Greece, the consequence of which, in the Americas, was that indigenous communities with no alphabetic writing were consequently deemed to have no philosophies, no knowledge of repute, and no capacity for abstract reflection.

Continuing from the non-indigenous perspective of seeing the pictograph as a primitive form of proto-writing, it is believed that this visual form of writing should have progressively disappeared once alphabetic writing as a technology and a skill was fully acquired. This however, has not occurred; the indigenous communities which are taught alphabetic writing continue to produce in varying degrees multimodal writing on paper and, like the alphabetic writing in Portuguese (rather than in indigenous languages) that accompanies it, it contradicts all expectations, apart from the standard historical (now unvoiced) preconception that a propensity for drawing may be a sign of the inherent infantility of the indigenous.

However, from the indigenous perspective, the same multimodal texts acquire a different significance. For example, in both Kashinawa and Kali'na, two Amazonian languages, the same word is used to refer both to "drawing" and to "writing," so, from the perspective of indigenous writers from these communities (Renault-Lescure), one writes when one draws and vice versa. Moreover, in Kali'na, a neologism had to be created to signify "reading," given

that to "read" an alphabetic text (that is, to recuperate sound and knowledge from it) is seen to be radically different from "reading" a visual text, from which one "recuperates" knowledge, but not sound (see below for further discussion of the connection between knowledge and voice). What is at stake here is the concept of *writing* in indigenous culture; rather than a mere technique or instrument for registering knowledge, as writing is perceived by their non-indigenous tutors, for these indigenous communities writing itself is an inseparable part of what constitutes knowledge.

Several Amazonian cultures, like Kashinawa, are cultures of *vision;* a ritual drink is consumed to bring on a vision whenever there is need for acquiring information or knowledge. This *vision* establishes a contact with the anaconda spirit, the mythical bearer of knowledge. From this indigenous perspective then, knowledge is gained from vision. If, as they learn from their non-indigenous tutors, the function of writing is the registration of knowledge, then from the indigenous perspective, writing has to register vision.

In this sense, far from being a neutral technology or skill, a mere instrument of progress, alphabetic writing is strongly implicated in Eurocentric concepts of knowledge and its source. As Derrida (1974) explains in his deconstruction of western logocentrism, from the logocentric western perspective, knowledge emanates from the mind of a speaker and is then voiced in speech; writing then is seen (also from the western perspective) as the representation of speech, and as such a second-order form of representing knowledge.

Given the purpose of writing to represent knowledge and not merely speech, for an indigenous writer from this community, alphabetic writing which merely registers speech needs to be complemented by the drawing of a visual text to guarantee the registration of knowledge.[5]

Besides being a source of knowledge, *vision* for indigenous cultures (such as the Kashinawa) is always contextualized and situated: considering that one knows what one sees, what one speaker knows/sees may not be what his interlocutor knows/sees, because they both see from different locations and hence different perspectives; these changes in perspective are linguistically

5 Curiously, for many western theorists, such as Ong (1982), indigenous cultures have been considered to be epitomes of primary *orality;* however, as we have seen, in the case of Amazonian indigenous cultures, knowledge is considered to be acquired *visually,* through visions, dreams or through lived experience (by watching, for example); in contrast, it is Eurocentric culture which is *oral* in its belief in alphabetic writing as a registration of voice, and voice (even in the silence of the letter) as the source of knowledge.

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marked by suffixes. This has been called "indigenous perspectivism" (Castro 2000), a philosophy that does not privilege any single viewpoint, but considers all viewpoints, like all the elements of nature, as being inter-related and mutually implicated. There is thus no separation of subject from object; the seer is also the seen. Truth value in indigenous perspectivism is *social:* what I see/know as an individual is qualitatively different, socially, from what I and you see/know; what the collective community sees/knows has the greatest social value. These perspectives are linguistically marked by suffixes. Personal narratives or opinions, as the product of personal views or perspectives (personal knowledge) are therefore marked differently from communal narratives or knowledge shared by the community (for example, the knowledge defined as "myths" in Eurocentric anthropological tradition).

In this process of knowledge formulation in indigenous perspectivism, *contextualization* is highly significant and necessary in order to establish the inter-relationship between interlocutors in a given social context (and hence establish the truth-values implicated in the given inter-relationship). Considering that alphabetic writing registers speech but not the speaker, by separating and distancing the "speech" from the speaker it therefore decontextualizes the information or knowledge it purports to represent; for members of indigenous cultures such as the Kashinawa, alphabetic writing being incapable of marking differences of perspective in information or knowledge, is seen to be deeply lacking, given that knowledge registered alphabetically has no means of indicating its truth value.

Here it is worth returning to the Eurocentric concept mentioned earlier whereby alphabetic knowledge is seen to be the origin of philosophy and justice because it reified and decontextualized speech and facilitated the transformation of knowledge, now written down, into an object of contemplation (and the harbinger of abstract thought).

From the point of view of indigenous perspectivism, decontextualized information cannot be knowledge, as, if it does not indicate its context, perspective or inter-relationship of the interlocutors, it cannot distinguish between "fact" and "fiction", between narratives of communal historiographic value and those of the creative imagination; thus alphabetic knowledge, from this indigenous perspective cannot function independently and needs to be contextualized; and this contextualization, lacking in alphabetic writing, needs to be provided by visual indications ("pictographs") of perspective and context.[6]

6 Similar to the primitiveness of the pictograph from the Eurocentric perspective, (because of its need for complementation, and its context-bound nature), for indigenous cultures such as the Kashinawa, as we have seen, it is alphabetic writ-

Writing and the Change of Tongue

A second, related, aspect of Brazilian indigenous writing also indicative of how writing may be seen as a map of intercultural contact and conflict, is the fact that much of it is written in Portuguese and not in indigenous languages, in spite of the official commitment to preserve the indigenous languages and cultures.

From the perspective of modern (Eurocentric) linguistics, putting a language into writing, and registering sounds in alphabets, requires an accompanying process of normatization; based on the hypothesis that all languages consist in their natural states, as "bundles" of multiple social and contextual variants, the process of normatization requires that a single form of "the" language be chosen as "the" norm and then have its sound system translated into letters. This institutional, ideological and conventional process is based on the need for a grammar as a register and guardian of the norm, used then to accompany the teaching of writing. From this Eurocentric stance, this process of normatization seems natural, transparent, logical, rational and harmless enough. Not so for indigenous perspectivism.

From the beginnings of colonial contact with these cultures in the 16th century to modern anthropology, it has been known that these Amazonian cultures are non-normative cultures; not *pre-state* social formations as many believed, in the Eurocentric tradition of linear evolutionary thinking, but as Clastres (1977) emphasizes, *anti-state* social formations.

As a consequence of their perspectivism, these indigenous cultures see all forms of nature as inter-related in a non-hierarchical fashion; difference is qualitative and not quantitative, contextual and never decontextualized; these are societies of spokes-persons and not chiefs or headmen; obligations are learnt and not imposed in these non-normative, non-hierarchical cultures. Non-hierarchical and non-normative does not mean that signification or appropriateness are absent from these cultures; on the contrary, both of these are contextually and not inherently defined. Learning is done implicitly by participating in and watching actions of others and listening to narratives; subjecthood is constructed through inter-relationships, and the greatest punishment is banishment from the community, seen as a fate equivalent to death (given that by severing all inter-connections with the community, subjecthood will cease to exist).

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ing that is lacking and needs complementation. This is no different to the reading habits of many in the literary field in western academies in whose practices there reigns the belief that texts *need* to be complemented, because alphabetic text is not as self-contained as imagined, even when it purports to be non fictional.

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An important corollary of this Amazonian indigenous philosophy of perspectivism and inter-relatedness, is the tradition of *predation* and *domestication* (Fausto 1999), through which a given social unit sees itself as vitally dependent on a real or symbolic relation with alterity and difference, based on a "logic of predation and domestication"; this social mechanism requires the periodic appropriation (often physically or symbolically violent[7]) of difference, rather than the peaceful exchange of identities; the difference thus appropriated (symbols, knowledge, persons, artifacts, tools) from external communities is then subjected to a process of domestication or transformation before it is consumed. In order to satisfy this logic of predation and the need for difference, the desired external difference (the novelty or newness) must be seen as qualitatively equal or superior to a related existent aspect of the culture, before it is appropriated and transformed.

In a similar sense, to say these cultures and their languages are non-normative does not mean that for them there are no norms or rules; it does mean the rejection of a concept of a *fixed, static, decontextualized* norm (such as that exemplified by a grammar). As Bourdieu (1997) has shown, norms are mutually constitutive with everyday practice, they orientate practice, and changes in practice modify norms. Bourdieu further shows how the "fallacy of the rule" establishes a rule based on practice and then pre-poses the rule to practice, forgetting that the origins of rules lie in practice and not in idealized abstraction.

In a similar vein, Bruner (2002) has shown how narratives have embedded in them cognitive-maps and function very much like grammars in the sense of acting as a repository for rule-governed behavior. Like grammars, then, narratives consist of abstract "reality constructs" or rules for constructing experience in terms of events and meanings, where these rules originated in practice. For Bruner, it is through these reality constructs that one learns to distance oneself from and organize the here and now of the input flux of lived experience. Narratives therefore imply distancing, organization and abstraction: "we distance ourselves from the immediacy of events by converting what we've encountered into story form" (89). As in the communally shared mythical narratives of indigenous cultures, the story form, as a communally shared narrative, acquires a standing of its own,

7 The violence in the appropriation of difference is not to possess difference as reified substance, but, from the perspectival, interrelated stance, it is the perceived need to gain access to the perspective of the other, to see as the other sees, to have access to the vision of the other. This does not imply a sense of loss of one's own vision, as vision is always unfixed, shifting and dependent on locus, and perspective.

representing a form of knowledge not unlike that embedded in communally shared abstract sets of rules, such as grammars. However, where narrative structures can and are actualized and updated, grammars tend to be less flexible. The Eurocentric linguistic tradition of gramatization is then a typical product of a hierarchical tradition and its predilection for the 'fallacy of the rule.' It is this that lies at the basis of the Eurocentric view that indigenous languages without written grammars, like indigenous cultures without philosophies or writing, are lesser forms of language and culture.

Against this background of knowledges and traditions, the Amazonian indigenous reluctance to write in indigenous languages may be understood in the following terms: as members of perspectival, non-normative cultures, they cannot recognize their own indigenous languages in fixed, static, decontextualized written grammars which (as we have seen above) besides being incapable of indicating a particular perspective (and hence unable to accommodate contextual shifts in perspective and truth value) propose to privilege one single form of language (a "norm") over several possible and qualitatively equivalent others.

On the other hand, from the indigenous perspective, Portuguese as the language of colonial hierarchy and imposition, as an instrument of a tradition of rejection of difference (and imposed truth values), should lend itself easily to normatization and a single fixed perspective, and hence to alphabetic writing. From the indigenous perspective, if one has to write alphabetically, with all the linguistic and ideological implications embedded in alphabetic literacy, it seems more logical that this be done in Portuguese.

Given the characteristics of Amazonian indigenous knowledge, these two aspects of indigenous writing in Brazil—the use of visual texts and the preference for writing in Portuguese, portray no essentialistic anti-colonial reaction, no outright rejection of writing as *theirs and not ours;* no essentialistic quest for even "strategic" authenticity (Razack 2004).

They reflect, rather, what I have mentioned above as the capacity of these indigenous communities to appropriate and transform (predation and domestication) Eurocentric knowledge, adapt it and recontextualize it for their own purposes. This complex process of cultural and linguistic appropriation has not been done in any complicated rationalistic metalanguage. As is customary, thinking is done in practice, in action, as in listening to narratives, and watching the actions of others; it is not abstracted or separated from practice and decontextualized as is characteristic of Eurocentric thinking.

Thus, in blatant contrast to Eurocentric misconceptions, the apparent absence of indigenous metalinguistic categories and abstract and decon-

textualized thinking in these cultures (seen as the result of the absence of alphabetic writing) does not mean the absence of critical thinking per se. And there is nothing that portrays this more than multimodal indigenous writing in Portuguese. It is in this sense that I proposed to read this writing as a map of the conflicts involved in the recent official commitment to indigenous languages and knowledges in Brazil. Symbolically, in this commitment, the state sees writing as part of a process of mutual recognition, as an exchange between equals; in practice, as I have sought to demonstrate, this remains a distant political ideal or a mere fiction, given that, without sufficient consideration of indigenous knowledges and their characteristics (knowledge as vision, perspectivism, inter-relatedness, the need for difference and alterity, the logic of predation and domestication), the policies involved tend to patronizingly seek to "preserve" what they in fact do not seem to understand. The very concept of preservation and its need in relation to these indigenous cultures implies the presupposed existence of a prior homogeneous cultural and linguistic essence or authenticity which was then corrupted, transformed or destroyed by the vicissitudes of colonial history, which the new official commitment now seeks to terminate and compensate. Moreover, a lack of critical awareness of the culture-bound nature of concepts such as writing, grammar, reading and most of all, knowledge, makes their use as instruments in a purported process of cultural and linguistic preservation lethal and self defeating.

From the indigenous perspective discussed here, the impossibility of equal exchange, the need for newness, difference and change will lead not to the preservation of an authentic static cultural substance or essence, but to the preservation of abstract cultural characteristics and mechanisms such as perspectivism, knowledge as vision, predation/domestication, and interrelatedness, all of these visible in the production of multimodal writing. As such, the object of and the process of preservation will continue to be the source of conflict between the indigenous cultures and the State, in spite of the "indigenous turn." What is needed is a change in the non-indigenous view of writing and its accompanying belief that the mere registration of indigenous knowledge on paper will contribute to its preservation. The non-indigenous academy which ultimately supplies the linguists and the anthropologists who become instrumental in implementing these policies ironically have to learn to interrupt the act of teaching *to write* (where they themselves and all their cultural concepts may uncritically offer themselves as the models of decontextualized authors of decontextualized written texts), and learn *to read* what is written by their indigenous students; the irony lies in the fact that these non-indigenous collaborators play an active role

in teacher-education courses, where their indigenous students are learning to be teachers, and where, as student teachers, they are critically aware of the fine line between teaching and learning. This same awareness appears to be lacking on the part of the non-indigenous teacher collaborators, who tend to assume the role of specialists, and as such become immune to a process of learning from their students. In spite of their predisposition to attribute equal respect to indigenous knowledge, this posture reveals, as Bhabha warned, a propensity to attribute *equal cultural respect* but not *equal cultural worth.*

If no change occurs in these postures, this top-down learning environment continues to re-enact the primordial scene of asymmetrical colonial contact, transforming the buzz-words of recent pro-indigenous policy ("bilingual and intercultural") into one more colonial travesty. However, given their cultural logic, the indigenous cultures discussed here remain far from seeing themselves as mere victims; they have appropriated ("preyed on") and violently transformed (domesticated) writing into its current multimodal form, thus silently continuing to follow the logic of the their cultural hero, the anaconda spirit; their openness to alterity and change has meant that the have never remained the "same"; the way they are now is not the way they were 100 or 500 years ago; and this, for them, is not loss or diminishing authenticity; it is vitality, the vitality that comes from the exterior, which, like the anaconda, remains the "same" by constantly changing skin—a lesson to be learnt before embarking on any simple dichotomization of relativism/essentialism, a quest for lost authenticity, or even a quest for the preservation of a cultural substance.

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