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## Aspects of Indigenous Participation in Brazilian Literature<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The article both presents how, from the end of the 1980s onwards, native peoples have begun to occupy certain spaces of textual production and circulation that they had not previously occupied in the Brazilian cultural scene (for social, linguistic, and cultural reasons, but also political and juridical) and discusses how this process has provoked a vigorous movement of dilation of traditional textual and discursive borders in Western culture. Texts deriving from indigenous peoples in the sphere of academic discourse are, in general, bilingual, and are structured in ways that combine aspects of intellectual production with those of artistic creation. Moreover, they are also structured around a rather complex conception of the notion of authorship (considering that they are written by an author but represent the voice of their people). As examples, the article analyzes the case of *Os cantos tradicionais Ye'kwana* [*Traditional Ye'kwana Chants*], by the indigenous teacher and researcher Fernando Ye'kwana Gimenes, winner of the 2020/2021 edition of the Dirce Cortes Riedel Masters Dissertation Award by the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature, as a typical example of the cultural phenomenon discussed. The traditional Ye'kwana chants present significant transgressions in relation to the traditional notions of narrative logic and the dominant forms of narration in the fields of literature and history. The awarding of this academic prize to an indigenous inhabitant of the forest, on the border between Brazil and Venezuela, by the largest association of comparative literature in Latin America, in addition to being an important act in political terms, demonstrates how urgent it is to rethink processes of global literary dissemination beyond the restricted frameworks configured by the logic of hegemonic cultures, which are based on closed divisions and hierarchies. With this, we intend to contribute to the process of including Amerindian texts in the repertoire of Comparative Literature and World Literature.

**Keywords:** World Literature, indigenous verbal art, criticism and literary circulation

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The eminently ethnocentric character of the colonial process was based on a critical tradition that denied the status of art to different types of artifacts produced by cultures considered “primitive.” From the first contacts, Europeans noticed that American indigenous languages did not have the phonemes /f/, /l/, /r/, and, based on this, they concluded that indigenous cultures lacked the statutes of *faith* and *law*, as well as the institution of the *king*, indispensable references in Europe at the time (Jobim 12).

The application of such a comparison supported the sedimentation of judgments in which Europe was used as a “ruler” to measure what was found in the New World. According to José Luís Jobim, “One of the legacies of New Worldism are the theories of lack”:

Lack theories assumed that a certain element, considered important in the European country of origin, should be included in the new domain. The absence of this element was seen as a lack, either because it was considered important in the European world or because it simply existed in that world, which was used as a basis for comparatism. (12)

Conceived as synonymous with illustration, hegemonic languages, with their collections of written and canonized texts, have always enjoyed much greater prestige and value than those attributed to languages of the oral tradition. In this way, Amerindian verbal-artistic productions were limited to the field of folklore manifestations, when not mere curiosity attributed to the exotic and superstitions.

Hence, the reason why an immense corpus of Amerindian texts was not considered to be endowed with artistic values but rather as myths and legends. From the colonizer’s perspective, the idea that indigenous populations may even have folklore, but certainly not culture, was naturalized; they may have myths, legends, and fables, but obviously, they have no literature; likewise, they have no art, only handicrafts.

One example of how this form of interpretation was historically constructed is that of German traveler Theodor Koch-Grünberg, who compared the content of the narratives he collected among the Taupang and Arekuná to “children’s toys” as they were produced from the “most open fantasy.” For this ethnographer, who left deep marks on anthropology and marked Brazilian intellectual and literary life in the 20th century, the fact that the “primitive concept of the world failed to differentiate between man and animal” (43-44) was proof of the infantile nature of this civilization.

In this context, in which narratives, songs, poems, and fables derived from the creation of indigenous populations never gained due attention and value, manifestations of Amerindian verbal art were not only disregarded in their ethical and aesthetic foundations but also in relation to the way in which they could be maintained and become a contemporary reference in different spheres of human experience. By the logic of the early 20th century, in addition to lacking literacy, these texts were doomed to exist in the remote past.

As evaluated by Antonio Risério, three main factors contributed to the maintenance of this type of negative formulation in relation to indigenous verbal art: first, the markedly subordinate

place occupied by the indigenous peoples in the Brazilian social hierarchy; secondly, only very recently has an anthropological sensitivity which is able to relativize former prejudices and unsustainable cultural positions been developed; and, finally, poetry and literature are the art of the word, and, as Risério attests, the word is the place for the manifestation of the fine flower of the intellectuality—constituting a private area, therefore, of the wealthy classes who are responsible for defining the parameters for the verbal arts.

In contrast to this state of affairs, nowadays one can see the emergence of a vigorous cultural phenomenon called *contemporary indigenous literature* on the Brazilian literary scene. Part of the political and cultural order, this process was structured around a humanitarian agenda of international scope, committed to combating violence against subaltern groups in the social fabric of modern nations.

The sequence of events that form, as Eric Hobsbawm rightly called it, the “age of catastrophe” (which ranges from the First World War, which tore apart the cartography of Europe, followed by the Russian Revolution, Nazism, and the Second World War, as well as the Spanish Civil War, and the wars of colonial independence, the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the Vietnam War, and many other civil wars fomented by military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s), led to multiple processes of *deterritorialization* and of forced *reterritorialization* for large numbers of human beings. In this environment, minority populations began to live under the yoke of Minority Treaties which, having been signed by various governments, were never recognized as law.

In reaction to this set of catastrophes, throughout the 20th century great advances were made in the processes of guaranteeing rights to minority populations. The creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations Organization and other regulatory agencies created conditions for the establishment of a legal framework of international scope. An important mark was the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, which defined the notion of minorities in terms of a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members—being nationals of that State—have ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics different from those of the rest of the population and demonstrate, at least implicitly, a sense of solidarity, aimed at preserving their culture, traditions, religion, and language.

In the troubled environment of Latin America at the time, a forceful questioning about the ills resulting from the violence of the colonial process was developing. With the increase of knowledge about the colonial and post-colonial condition of the American continent, originating from different fields of knowledge, strong critiques were made of the historical, social, economic, cultural, artistic, and philosophical heritage derived from the colonial process and condition.

In this context, the *testimonio*, a typically Latin American literary form characterized by establishing a relationship between literature and violence, emerged. The genre gained prestige when the Casa de las Américas Literary Prize (House of the Americas Literary Prize) established an award for texts constructed from multiple combinations of literary, documentary, and journalistic discourses, and which recorded and interpreted the violence of Latin American

dictatorships during the 20th century. A second meaning of the genre also appeared: *testimonio* as a derivative of a proactive type of political and cultural activism carried out by American indigenous populations. As a result of this indigenous activism, the expression *testimonio literature* began to circulate with greater force, designating a literary genre characterized as the

result of the encounter between an “official” narrator and a narrator who is not part of the spaces of knowledge production considered legitimate, but whose experience, when told and registered, constitutes a new knowledge that modifies the knowledge about society produced until then. The testimony is written with strong elements of political commitment: the literary writer would have the function of collecting the voice of the subaltern, of the marginalized, in order to enable a critique and a counterpoint to the “official history,” that is, the hegemonic version of History. The scholar—editor/organizer of the text—is supportive and must faithfully reproduce the speech of the other; this is legitimized by their being representative of a class, a community or a broad and oppressed social segment. (de Marco 46)

An excellent example of this typical Latin American literary manifestation is that of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así nació mi conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*) by the homonymous indigenous woman, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. In the work the Guatemalan activist tells her own life story and what she considers to be the true war that the hegemonic culture of Guatemala has imposed on the Maya-Quiché culture, to which she belongs. Having difficulty reading and writing in Spanish, Rigoberta Menchú gave testimonies to the French-Venezuelan anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, when she recounted her own life and that of her family.

The book was the subject of controversy when, in 1999, David Stoll accused Menchú of having altered the facts of her life in order to give an image that her family had been radical fighters in defense of social rights in Guatemala: “What if much of Rigoberta’s story is not true?” (8-9). Stoll proved that Rigoberta’s father had received land from the Guatemalan government and had collaborated with the US peacekeeping forces and that the Menchú family did not live in such bad conditions as she had narrated, presenting her family as semi-enslaved on the coffee plantations. Finally, he denounced that, contrary to what had been narrated in the book, Rigoberta’s brother had not been burned alive in a public square and that he had died after being shot.

Despite the controversy that engulfed the US academic milieu, the legitimacy of the Prize was not denied to Menchú, on the allegation that the denunciation reflected the unjust and inhumane nature of the historical process of violence committed by the Guatemalan military against the Maya-Quiché people. Defenders of Menchú, notably Arturo Arias, argued that the inaccuracies would have occurred due to the need to illustrate the history of repression and violence against indigenous populations in Guatemala: “Menchú Tum had become a de facto spokesperson for all Maia peoples because she could speak out and utter a discourse in which most Mayas recognized themselves yet could not utter themselves for fear of reprisals” (1). In this way, the testimony gains strength because it does not only include what she saw

but also what was transmitted to her by the oral tradition of her people, and she verbalizes not only an individual experience but also a collective way of seeing the past.

The emergence of such a project to affirm the identity of Native American peoples led to serious questions about the establishment of the notion of the canon as a way of organizing and structuring the chain of production and circulation of cultural and literary artifacts. This state of affairs resulted in both the necessity to include elements of non-Western cultures in the list of contemporary artistic realizations and the need to redefine the object of literature and to reconfigure the field of literary studies itself. From this soil there emerged a movement of ethnic authorship whose focus was the need to reformulate the notion of literature from the cultural production that takes place on the “margins” of the world system of culture.

In Brazil, groups that showed a strong feeling for the preservation of their cultures began to gain momentum with the advent of the redemocratization process. The culmination of this process occurred with the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution—the first to recognize the rights of minorities to live their ethnic differences.

As a result of the creation and development of educational programs driven by the new legal order, indigenous teachers began to produce a large number of didactic and educational materials both in indigenous languages and in Portuguese. It is in this complex and contradictory context—which establishes the commitment to the “rescue” and strengthening of traditions and oral-based ancestral knowledge while also nurturing the need and desire for the appropriation of writing—that the phenomenon usually referred to as *contemporary indigenous literature* in Brazil emerges.

The open circulation of indigenous verbal art on the contemporary Brazilian cultural scene certainly derives from a recent process of the appropriation of alphabetic writing and also from the mastery of new technologies by ever-increasing contingents of subjects from oral-based cultures. Édouard Glissant had already predicted that the development of communication technologies would make possible a convergence between the literate world, focused on the orality of “new media, and the traditional communities that emerge on the great world scene” (48). Indigenous peoples have become totally up-to-date and have learned to use social networks to publicize their causes, struggles, arts, and cultures, and the video broadcasts of indigenous writers have become persistent and competitive.

After 2008, with the enactment of Law No. 11645, which made the teaching and learning of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures mandatory in Brazilian primary schools, there was a huge growth in written productions, films, documentaries, and audio and video recordings made by indigenous people from the north to the south of the Americas. In this environment, the discursive and textual vein of modern indigenous literature also became very attractive for publishing houses. Since then, leveraged by educational interest and the demands arising from one of the largest book distribution programs in the world, the National Program for Educational Books, of the Brazilian Federal Government, indigenous production, especially that aimed at children and youth, has grown at a dizzying pace.

As indigenous peoples entered spaces of enunciation that they had not previously occupied on the Latin American and Brazilian cultural scene, the last decades of the 20th century saw a vigorous movement of dilation and interpenetration of the borders that demarcated both the

discursive fields and the literary and academic forms then in force. *A queda do céu (The Fall of the Sky)*, by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, exemplifies the innovations of the emerging indigenous literary movement on the American and Brazilian cultural scene.

The figure of Ailton Krenak, a true indigenous bestseller, is internationally recognized as a leader, environmentalist, philosopher, poet, and writer. In *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo (Ideas to Postpone the End of the World)*, he deals with the erosion of the relationship between man and nature and makes a devastating analysis of how the model of exploitation of Western civilization has been responsible for the great environmental disasters on the planet. Krenak's work has achieved widespread acclaim in Brazilian and American culture.

In addition to Kopenawa and Krenak, the names of Eliane Potiguara, Daniel Munduruku, Cristino Wapichana, Graça Graúna, Kaká Werá, Olívio Jekupé, and Márcia Kambeba, among others, have gained fame. These writers began to assume a more individualized type of authorship, almost always using the expedient of stamping their own and individual names on the cover, with the addition of the denominations of their ethnic groups: Aílton Krenak, Cristino Wapichana, Márcia Kambeba, Eli Macuxi, etc.

In this scenario, in which subaltern voices have conquered the right to express themselves in different ways, indigenous texts have begun to take on importance for different reasons, especially: a) the development of ways of thinking, dealing with, and protecting nature in the face of environmental devastation produced by the modes of capitalist exploitation; b) the creation of connections between readers and a certain "natural" dimension of life, including providing a type of approximation with what could be called the "ancestral soul of the planet"; and c) the formulation of denunciations of colonial and imperialist violence against minority and subaltern groups of the original populations of the Americas in the social fabric of modern national states.

The emergence of an indigenous verbal art has created conditions for the production and circulation of different types of texts and textual genres in relation to the notion of authorship and forms of linguistic and cultural expressiveness, as well as favoring the occurrence of continuous and significant transgressions in relation to the traditional notions of narrative logic, and to the dominant forms of narration in the fields of literature and history. All these aspects help to shape the most pressing topic in contemporary public academic debate and demonstrate that the emergence of indigenous verbal art may be seen as the most important innovation of the contemporary Brazilian literary system.

From this contrast, it becomes imperative to recognize the fact that valuing indigenous epistemologies presupposes the coexistence and mutual presence of different cultures in a world where one can and must recognize multiplicity and diversity. The appropriation of writing by indigenous subjects contributes, one might assume, to the existence of a certain degree of convergence between indigenous traditions and the Western tradition. This situation thus expands the possibilities that stor(y) (ies) can be told from other angles of apprehension and understanding of reality.

Considering the situation reported above, we can draw attention to the existence of an apparent contradiction imposed by the indigenous writer's *métier*, which is a certain contrast

between the vehemence with which the capitalist machine that devours worlds is denounced and the fact that certain authors of the current of contemporary indigenous literature have adapted well to the modes of production of the capitalist intellectual market. In this scenario it is necessary to maintain a certain level of attention so that the indigenous symbolic capital does not become a mere commodity at the service of the capitalist machine, which almost always devours and corrupts everything in favor of profit.

Hence the importance of relating the different textual forms with certain aspects that configure the types of occurrences of the indigenous literary phenomenon. Knowledge of this issue is gradually increasing, and it is now a promising investigative vein that branches out into different strands to extend studies in both the far-reaching ethnographic tradition of collection and interpretation and in contemporary indigenous literature.

Due to the fact that little attention has been given to the production derived from the performance of indigenous people in the sphere of what can be designated as *academic discursivities*, from now on I propose to make a partial assessment of this type of artifact, which constitutes a definite innovation in Brazilian thinking. Indigenous people can be highlighted as producers of academic texts, and proof of this can be pointed out, for example, in the cases of João Paulo Tucano, who won the Capes Prize for the best thesis in the area of Social Anthropology in 2022,<sup>2</sup> and Jucicleide Pereira Mendonça dos Santos and Fernando Ye'kwana Gimenes, who won the prize for best dissertation in the 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 editions, respectively, of the Dirce Cortes Riedel award, granted by the respected Brazilian Comparative Literature Association.

The examples mentioned above prove the fact that the consolidation of the presence and qualification of indigenous people *stricto sensu* postgraduate courses is a necessary and beneficial policy of compensation for the injustices and physical and symbolic violence carried out throughout history against the native Brazilian populations. They also show that the majority societies have a lot to gain from the recognition of the potential for epistemological innovation that this brings. Moreover, it should be added that, in the field of literary studies, this has led to the production of artifacts that can be described as complex texts.

This is due to the fact that texts produced by indigenous students in the field of Literary Studies, despite assuming an unequivocal academic character (since, after all, they are produced as master's and doctoral dissertations and theses), have taken on forms that provoke ruptures in the logical structure of the academic prose they use. In them, typical elements of academic prose discourses are frequently articulated with others specific to narrative forms with a historical and mythical background. The result of this mixture is a peculiar configuration of forms and genres, given that it disrespects the traditional boundaries between literature and academic prose, and between history and fiction and narrative with a mythical background.

A characteristic of these new textual arrangements is that they are based on a more comprehensive conception of the notion of authorship, given that they are related to the histories of communities, which in some way integrate the individual and the collective into a whole in which the understanding of one is linked to understanding of the other. They are also characterized



by the hybrid language in which they express themselves and also by the bilingualism they often display. From another perspective, these language artifacts present structures that combine aspects of intellectual production with those of artistic creation and are therefore texts whose authorship is defined according to the threshold and interstitial space that they occupy between the productions of analytical thought and those of the creation of the spirit.

That said, it should be noted that, although only in the last two decades have indigenous people started to ostensibly occupy spaces in undergraduate and graduate courses in Brazilian public universities, there has also been a considerable increase in the interest that the production derived from the entry and permanence of indigenous peoples in the academic production circuit, where, it is worth repeating, both a peculiar type of authorial persona as well as quite specific genres and textual forms, proliferate.

It so happens that nowadays the spaces for the production of academic thinking greatly value divergent ways of seeing, feeling, and knowing, as well as ways of thinking which are different from those considered to be typical of the “Western tradition.” As a result, the production deriving from the entry of indigenous people into graduate schools, a privileged space for research, has its own peculiar forms of existence and cultural and literary circulation. This is due to the fact that, even though they occupy the status of researchers, these people enunciate as subjects inscribed in a non-Western ontology, which could perhaps be called “dissonant.” Relying on the support of these privileged spaces for academic research, indigenous people, in general teachers who work at indigenous schools in the communities, have managed to structure, create, and develop a type of production that takes on very particular forms of existence and circulation.

Indigenous people who occupy these places enjoy a privileged position provided by the condition of researcher, given that, although they enunciate in the condition of the subjects of a non-Western and dissonant ontology, they are constituted as accredited and endorsed by the very condition they came to occupy in the space of academic production—which, we repeat, today greatly values ways of seeing and knowing the world which are different from the so-called “Western tradition.” In summary, we can suggest that this is a verbal-literary production marked by a certain “disconcerting” presence, one might say, of the sensitive and the symbolic.

As a result, we can propose, as Michel Chaillou wrote (qtd. in Viart 20), that this aspect also demarcates a certain dimension of contemporaneity, and that it alerts us to the reality that the notion of the contemporary cannot be confused with that of the present. Discussing this aspect of the literary forms of our days, Zilá Bernd states that

Both Ouellet and Faerber speak of the contemporary not only as something that comes “afterwards” (as in post-modernity), and which is soon outdated, but rather as a time outside the linearity of Cronos (linear time, measured by the clock, devourer of time), something that is staged and takes on new forms of temporality (such as Kairos and Aion) that mark the complex relationship between the instant and eternity. Something that takes on the relational and performative perspective of the transcultural.



In the transcultural perspective, which is defended by Faerber, what is sought is not the synthesis that characterizes the intercultural perspective but rather the surpassing: in the contact of two or more cultures it does not matter to know how much one “influenced” the other, whether acculturation or deculturation took place, but rather the emergence of new cultural products that originated from this initial contact. On the transcultural level, the aim is dissent and not consensus. (52-53)

As can be seen, one of the traits that outline the contemporary has to do with putting all the centuries together, juxtaposing different temporalities. Considering the validity of this type of formulation, we can propose that the production derived from the work of indigenous researchers in this environment has been creating very favorable conditions for a type of production with an ethnographic, anthropological, and artistic-literary approach that has no precedent in the history of American and Brazilian textual forms.

And this is so because, on the one hand, this contingent of indigenous people is constituted as researchers designated as such by the very communities in which they usually live and work, through the affirmation of a commitment which is both ethical and intellectual, and communal and educational, supporting the preservation and diffusion of indigenous cultures. The advantages of occupying an authorial position like this are doubly interesting because being

chosen and committed to internal training policies, almost always defined by the villages where they live, these researchers rely on the support and participation of their communities so that they can collect, organize, and publish verbal manifestations of a collective nature in the form of written works of the tribe. These texts, in general, have the function of recording narratives, songs and traditional knowledge, such as the practice of medicine, and the rites of the propitiation of nature (in relation to hunting, fishing, gardening, building houses, and of all artifacts in ordinary use). (Carvalho 414)

From this condition there derives a dual status as a researcher that encompasses an internal and community dimension and an external and academic dimension. This condition ends up propitiating displacements in relation to both academic and indigenous cultures.

Indigenous researchers are able to both overcome the severe difficulties of capturing and fixing traditional texts of indigenous verbal art, and to subsequently study and analyze them given that they not only enjoy the trust of their relatives, which is a facilitating aspect of the collection, but also have a type of knowledge that non-indigenous people rarely have of indigenous cultures, thereby facilitating the processes of interpretation and the construction of meanings.

Indigenous professors who venture into academic life therefore enjoy excellent conditions to deal with the difficulties of capturing indigenous texts—difficulties derived from problems imposed by barriers of a linguistic and cultural nature, but also, as we know, of a political and social nature. This is so because:

opportunities for non-indigenous researchers to come into direct contact with this type of text are increasingly rare. This happens because many of the collection methods formerly used are no longer accepted by academic practices and by the ethics of current research protocols. In this way, opportunities to experience moments of spontaneous manifestation of indigenous verbal art on the ground and in the daily life of indigenous communities are increasingly difficult to find. Hence the difficulties for their appreciation and analysis at the present time. (Carvalho 403)

In this context, indigenous teachers have begun to take on roles that they historically did not play given that they were previously restricted to elders, shamans, and healers. Today, in this scenario where teachers become the vector of preservation and cultural transmission, it is the communities themselves that select them so that they can fulfill this function of being the vector of transmission of knowledge considered as ancestral. In a previous text, we stated that:

The most likely situation, and the most comfortable, perhaps, to confront the issues imposed in order to capture, fix, and analyze this type of textual occurrence is found in the possibility that the indigenous subjects themselves can carry out this task. A sizeable contingent of these subjects are now going through the process of academic training and are qualifying as researchers in undergraduate and graduate courses at Brazilian universities. This contingent of indigenous professors and university students face the challenge of carrying out this task, the success of which will contribute both to the desired strengthening of indigenous cultures and the deepening of knowledge about the textual forms of indigenous verbal art. (403-404)

This type of activity constitutes a kind of coping strategy for two problems. The first has to do with the possibility of facing the process of rapid and serious loss of cultural characteristics seen as original, motivated by the many appeals of modernity, transforming the school, a necessary reality of today's Brazilian indigenous life, into a space for the strengthening of indigenous cultures. The second has to do with the very possibility of occupying this space from which indigenous people were historically excluded and thus to make known to Brazilian society as a whole the greatness and multiplicity of Amerindian "metaphysics" in a different way from that previously established by Western culture.

On the other hand, we must remain alert to the reality that such a perspective of investigating the collection of indigenous verbal art has, by obligation, to renounce reifying and hierarchically structured epistemic practices. This is exactly the case of *Os cantos tradicionais Ye'kwana (Traditional Ye'kwana Chants)*, by Gimenes, a text that, under the guidance of the author of this article, won the Dirce Cortes Riedel Award, from the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature, for the best Masters dissertation of the year 2021/2022. The production of this curious artifact of indigenous verbal art took place as a result of a kind of commitment signed between Gimenes and the Fuduwaaduinha/Auaris community, who entrusted Professor Gimenes with

collecting and systematizing the songs of the Ye'kwana people.

The author defines the situation in the following terms:

In addition to the intention of leaving this heritage of my people on record for the younger people of the communities and for all those who are interested in the culture of the Ye'kwana, I also have another aim: to disseminate information inside and outside the Ye'kwana communities. The forms and functions of these important elements that are essential to our culture as they are what keep the memory and existence of our people alive. For this reason this text also serves as teaching material to be used by teachers at the school in my community and at all Ye'kwana schools. I think this is important because, after the school was introduced into the communities, and the children started to have their days occupied with schoolwork, they lost the opportunity to learn the songs, which they had always learned before the school for the Ye'kwana existed.

To give you an idea, nowadays, parents almost no longer have the custom of planting *fiya'kwa* in their backyards, to teach their children songs and languages. (14-15)

At this point, I make a brief digression: the *fiya'kwa* is a climbing plant used to teach young people to memorize songs, stories, and all the types of language that need to be learned: birds, fish, animals, spirits, and plants, among others. Previously, as the *fiya'kwa* was invariably used as a way of ensuring the memorization of the *Wattuna* chants and narratives, the incredible code of Ye'kwana life, which is constituted as a combined chant and narrative, the Ye'kwana always planted it in their vegetable gardens. Since it is no longer customary to plant *fiya'kwa*, registering the content of the verbal heritage is largely up to the school and teachers. This happens because the old “singers” and “historians” are disappearing, and the younger ones need the school process to have access to this type of knowledge that had previously been transmitted by the flow of life's necessities.

The commitment established between teachers and their communities may be summarized as follows: to present the existing relationship between the domains of teaching and that of stories and songs; to consider how stories and traditional songs circulate in the community and how they have been conserved and transmitted; to discuss what they are for and what magical, religious, and cultural meanings they propagate; to be aware of importance of translating and organizing the chants and how to transmit their learning at school.

Gimenes was mentored by the greatest experts in songs, prayers, and *Wätunnä*, especially Vicente Castro Yuuduwaana, the greatest “living Ye'kwana historian,” and Joaquim José Pereira. In another aspect, this process was academically guided by myself, as a professor of the Graduate Program in Letters at the Federal University of Roraima, thus providing a certain element of the collective construction of the text in Portuguese.

*Traditional Ye'kwana Chants* contain elements from the areas of myth, theogony, and the history of the people, but also from ritual chants and incantatory poetry. The text results not only from the confidence that the community placed in him so that, as a teacher, he could research and record

the songs (because the older people who know these songs are disappearing and the younger ones today need the school process to have access to this type of knowledge that was previously mainly transmitted by the flow of the necessities of life), but also the informational support that the elders provided for the task to be carried out, as well as the collective writing of the text in Portuguese.

Eventually, as he could count on support in the community and academic spheres, this Brazilian indigenous man, who has Ye'kwana as his mother tongue, was able to produce an interesting discursive work in a bilingual version. The difficulties of writing in Portuguese, as Gimenes speaks Portuguese as a second language, were overcome by the tutorial orientation that gave continuous support to his work.

This guidance provided support in different activities: for example, accompanying the reading of academic texts, and help in writing the final papers required in each subject studied in the postgraduate course and in each step of writing the dissertation, in a humanized and personalized way for the student, through the support of an advisor and a student with a scholarship. It is a work of unique character that is defined by the fact that the text contains elements of myth, theogony, the history of the Fuduwaaduinha/Auarís people and their community, and also ritual chant and incantation poetry. In this process the indigenous person ceases to occupy the subordinate condition of informant to become the author of their own production.

I believe that the question of whether we should call the origin narratives, orally transmitted by Amerindian communities, "myths," or whether this would be a designation that would subordinate these narratives in relation to Western narratives, which are not considered myths, but metaphysics or ontologies, might be answered as follows.

Firstly, we have to recognize that this type of text is manifested on different occasions in everyday life:

when fixing the supports and building the ridge of the roof of the house, in the act of weaving the sieve or building canoes, when clearing and sowing the field, etc.; but also at major events in the village: at the menarche, when the girl enters adult life, or at the birth of a child, whose placenta needs to be buried correctly, so that the worms do not eat it and the spirits do not molest the newborn; to scare away the sadness on the occasion of the death of a relative, among many other situations. It is in this environment that the narrative touches myth.

But this type of occurrence of textual production also usually takes place in the classroom of indigenous schools. It usually occurs, it should be added, through the direct participation of certain elders, who some time ago began to be invited to speak to younger people in the school environment. It is possible to suppose that, in these specific situations, in which the verbal-artistic activity moves from the continuous flow of life to the school space, there remains some dubiousness in relation to the question of whether it is the occurrence of an act of faith, derived from the mythical experience and collective, or an act of aesthetic fruition, of pure literary manifestation. (Carvalho 401).

The functions are altered by the purported uses of this material. Due to the expertise they acquire throughout this process, indigenous teachers are now occupying symbolic production spaces that were previously exclusive to elders and specialists in verbal art.

The recognition of the qualities of Fernando's work—by the jury of the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature, when conferring the award for the dissertation presented in the Graduate Program in Letters of the Federal University of Roraima, gave the opinion that the text

fills gaps in the production of circulating knowledge, and presents clear editorial interest, in the sense of: a) producing publications that can be recommended in courses training new comparative literature specialists, whether in undergraduate or graduate studies; b) in the choice of important and original themes, methodologies and/or critical approaches, which place the knowledge produced by these investigations in a condition of simultaneous epistemic courage and daring, helping to broaden the scope of comparative studies; c) in the evident simultaneous ethical and scientific commitment to the global construction of the research questions presented, in order to situate the results of the dissertations at the frontiers.<sup>3</sup>

But how should narratives of an autobiographical nature, but also a community one, attributed to Amerindian authors, which are mediated/elaborated/organized/structured by “white” agents be treated?

To begin with, it is worth remembering that, although the author's name on the cover of the book published by the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature is Fernando Ye'kwana Gimenes, the text results from a type of collective initiative, in which the elderly storytellers, designated as historians, perform the function of sources. Hence, we have a case of individual authorship that is based on a type of community and collective collaboration.

In another dimension, as Gimenes has considerable difficulty to write in Portuguese, the final text results from collaborative writing, in which the supervisor's participation is seen not only in the structure and language of the text but also in certain aspects of the linking of the topic and in the translation of the chants from the Ye'kwana language into Portuguese. Here, it should be added that this type of situation, with the intervention of a mediator, does not constitute a singular or unique case, as shown by the examples of Davi Kopenawa and Rigoberta Menchú. As can be seen, there are many crossings, of a community and academic nature, that make up the complex textual fabric of *Traditional Ye'kwana Chants*.

We believe that, with what has been said above, we are just beginning to present the thick web that supports the notion of authorship of these unique texts that are now beginning to circulate in the field of Brazilian academic and literary culture. We also recognize their potential to expand the boundaries of what we do and practice in the field of productions of the spirit and analytical thinking and also that this work will result in the expansion of the ways we conceive of and act in the world we live in—all together, mixed and increasingly connected.

## Notes

1. This text is translated by John Milton, Universidade de São Paulo.
2. Capes: Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel. A foundation within the Ministry of Education in Brazil.
3. See the Facebook of Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada.

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