

From a writing lesson*

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with Jacques Derrida's interpolation of the celebrated chapter A Writing Lesson by Claude Lévi-Strauss's, and James Clifford critique of the ethnographic text, the authors of this essay reflect on the written dimension of the ethnographic *métier*.

Keywords: anthropological theory, ethnography, text, writing.

Where there is not a text, there is not an object of study and thought.

Bakhtin

I

If anthropology is what anthropologists do, and if what anthropologists do is write, then there is nothing more relevant than to think about writing, the writing dimension of the *métier*. It is precisely the written aspect of ethnographic practice that this small and modest textual experiment, written with four hands, has the intention of taking up. A modest enterprise, once we limit ourselves to presenting, in its irreducible literariness, one mode or example of ethnographic writing – precisely one that takes up writing and its emergence, that is, *A Writing Lesson* by Claude Lévi-Strauss – placing it side by side with two seminal works on writing, those of James Clifford and Jacques Derrida, in the same way taken in all their literariness.¹ What this is, then, is nothing less than an exercise in *bricolage*, since we have intentionally avoided hermeneutical and nominal strictures (given that we assume that in the absences of the present figure,

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¹ Lévi-Strauss' theory of writing can be found in English as chapter twenty-eight of *Tristes Tropiques* (1992, Penguin Books), suggestively entitled *A Writing Lesson*. A Derridian deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss' theory of writing can be found in English as the first chapter of the second part of *Of Grammatology* (1998, John Hopkins University Press) with the title "The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau." For the writing of this essay, however, the authors used the Portuguese translations of the original French, Lévi-Strauss (1981) and Derrida (1999). All quotes are English translations of, and all page numbers refer to, these consulted Portuguese editions.

that is, the referent, there remains the reference and the undecidable), but we simply (and wouldn't this be enough?) arrange the material here as it is disposed by Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and Clifford. This is not, however, an enterprise in translation – “definitive interpretation” (Derrida, 2002, p. 24) – but of translation in the sense of movement, that is, marking intertextual affinities and “relationships virtually more necessarily citational” (Derrida, 1972, p. 111).

From Clifford, we take the proposition that “ethnography is, from beginning to end, immersed in writing,” and that it is a literary genre (Clifford, 1998, p. 21).² From a Derridian perspective, which in its own way corroborates Clifford, we continue with a reflection on logocentrism and phonocentrism as privileged in Western thought, where the opposition inside/outside is taken “as the pattern for a whole series of oppositions that regulate the concepts of speaking and writing and that presuppose a following relation: speech – inside/intelligible/essence/true: writing – outside/sensory/appearance/false” (Santiago, p. 30, 56).³

II

In broad strokes, it can be said that together with the founding of anthropology as a discipline and its scientific pretensions of explanation and the conceptualization of difference, is born a new literary style, ethnography. However fundamental it was for the constitution and legitimating of the emerging discipline, it was denied that ethnography was literary work. This was a strategic negation, given the objectivist obsession of ethnographic realism that, while basing itself in the personal experience of the anthropologist in the field – the famous “I was there” – anchors itself in an “ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience” (Clifford; Marcus, 1986, p. 2). Ethnographic realism wants, as science, to be a synthetic cultural description based on participant observation, and in that way configures for itself a modality of authority – the “you are there... because I was there” – established in writing, by writing, beginning with specific literary conventions. In other words, ethnographic realism is a specific textual practice.

Ethnography as writing returns today as a type of “return of the repressed,” opening up a specific space of questioning within the discipline, a space that is called “meta-anthropology” by some, a title which itself already forecasts that the questions raised go deep, to the very core of what anthropology is. Revealing questions have been placed to one side: how is an uncontrollable experience (read as fieldwork) transformed into a written and legitimate (?) story (read as ethnography as a cultural description/interpretation)? How is a “loquacious and overdetermined intercultural encounter,” constituted by power relations and pregnant with personal objectives,

² Again, here, what appears in quotes is an English translation of the Portuguese text consulted.

³ The philosophy of Derrida, especially in its first phase, was characterized by an incessant critical persecution of one of the most recurring and symptomatic conceptual mechanisms in the long history of Western metaphysics, “the notion that writing is, in some way, external to language, a threat coming from outside that must always be surrounded by the stabilizing presence of speech” (Norris, 1989, p. 40). The strategy of privileging speech in the communicative process is, at the same time an undermining of writing as derivative and imperfect. It is constituted in the Western episteme, as a way of administrating, in the construction of an argument, specific functional aspects of language: “if distance, error, misunderstanding, obscurantism, and ambiguity are characteristics of writing, then, by distinguishing writing from speech, a model of communication can be constructed that takes as its norm an ideal associated with speech – where words carry a meaning and the listener can, in principle, understand precisely what the speaker has in mind” (Culler, 1989, p. 101).

“circumscribed by an adequate version of ‘another world’ more or less differentiated, composed by a single author” (Clifford, 1998, p. 21)?

There is no way to continue hiding the evidence, fieldwork is constituted and shot through by “language events”; our (field researcher) data is constituted, as Clifford correctly observes, “under discursive, dialogical, conditions.” Or as he asserts, is “appropriate only by means of textual forms.” Let us remind ourselves that “research events and encounters are transformed into fieldnotes”, “experiences turn into narratives, significant occurrences, or examples” (Clifford, 1998, p. 41, 44).

The representation of alterity occurs and becomes visible, in a double and complex game, as both an activity and object of anthropology. What is in question is not difference, but its representation, its postponement, its absence, all moves that if made evident would have as their most immediate consequence the disintegration of so-called “ethnographic authority.” The discipline itself becomes thought as an exemplary expression of the ways by means an *episteme*, at the moment of textualizing the other (its “outside”) as “object,” constructs, administers, and defends its own economy of relationships and putting down roots.⁴

If taken seriously, the written dimension of the *métier* produces important effects, among others: freeing up the narrative, weakening of the coercive force of the reference (metaphysics of presence), and demystifying the disquieting and claustrophobic effects of the so-called hermeneutic circle. Thinking difference continues to be our (anthropology as human science) *telos*. But disquieting questions have been introduced: What if thought is already linked to difference at its very origin, in a tacit agreement that annuls all its power to unveil? What if difference, before it became an object of study, was a disseminating and productive force, that wrapped and overcame the observer, leaving for us barely the traces of its passing? And what if the origin of thought, of experiencing, and of writing was in fact really to differentiate, make different?

Such an investigation, as applied to the discursive authority of ethnography, produces revealing effects. As Clifford (1998) demonstrates, the discursive authority of ethnographic realism is enacted, that is, textualized by means of a formulation of a “persuasive fiction,” in other words, a coherent narrative of intercultural contact according to an appeasing logic that would have with key symbols as culture, society, structure, participant observation, experience, etc., a system able to subsume the tensions coming from the concrete actions of the multiple subjectivities of a generalized “other.” What is being described is a kind of “textual machine,” that aims at producing collective subjects and that, in the process, tries to erase the traces of its functioning by obliterating the space of the authorial “I”. Ethnography is an articulating mechanism in a coherent system of a series of differential operations. Its ultimate end is, thus, order.

As a specific textual practice, ethnographic realism produced a silent tradition that, since Malinowski, establishes its effectiveness in a writing game of show-and-hide: first, affirming the singular experience of an “I was there,” to, immediately there after suppress or dissolve along the length of the text the position of subject utilizing a realist narrative based in the famous “free indirect style.” In other words, defending itself from writing, with writing, the writer turns scientist, a classic move, according to Derrida (1999), of Western metaphysics during the history of its existence.

The scientificity of anthropology is constructed, then, by the negation of its textuality. It distances itself, in that way, from literature, rhetoric, and art, at the same

⁴ As Rabinow affirms (1999, p. 116): “I work with the hypothesis that it is possible to analyze reason in the same general fashion as other ethnographic objects are analyzed, in other words, as a conjunction of social practices in complex pragmatic relationships with related symbols.”

time that it draws nearer to logic, reason, and truth. Language is reduced to the space of “expression,” of the exposition of a previous presence to participant observation. By means of that type of textual operation, anthropology discursively produces its non-discursive origin.

Anthropology produces also one of the most powerful “narrative structures” or “rhetorical constructions” – characteristic of the “representational practice” of ethnographic realism – a “‘redemptive’ or ‘salvation’ ethnography.” The primitive or traditional person, all objects in extinction, are redeemed *in* and *by* the text (Clifford, 1998, p. 84). The discipline would be, in that way, understood as a process of saving inscriptions of the lost other, performing an “allegory of redemption,” that is, a defense of the purity of primitive/traditional orality against the inevitable and noxious advances of modern historicity. Writing, even though violent and a simulacrum, would save (always with some inevitable loss) the unbreakable purity of speech and native culture. By means of that type of textual operation, the anthropologist, “he who records and interprets the fragile custom,” acts like “the depository of an essence, unattributable witness of an authenticity” (Clifford, 1998, p. 84).

The principle point to the allegory of redemption reveals itself when ethnography is understood as a process of writing, specifically one of textualization. With respect to the allegory of redemption, Clifford (1998, p. 85) says: “Every description or interpretation that conceives itself as ‘bringing a culture to the terrain of the written,’ as moving from experience oral-discursive (that of the native, of the field researcher) to a written vision of that experience (the ethnographic text), is enacting the structure of ‘redemption’.” In a word, the rejection of signifying writing is a basic principle of the discursive economy of anthropology. It supplants immediate experience (participant observation) with the text as medium (ethnography); it supplants native orality (innocence which is essence) with modern writing (its *pharmakon*, poison and formal cure).⁵

Everything happens as if anthropologists wrote only for negative reasons. The text is necessary but dangerous, given that it institutes a space of absence and artifice where before there was a full and evident presence of the experience of alterity. Textual reliving of the lived presence and nostalgic textual insertion of the other, here is, then, two of the hidden ghosts of the self-proclaimed science of man.

III

The writer of *Tristes Tropiques* is a “founder of discursivity” in anthropology, and as such, of importance not only with respect to a determined work, “but also for a way of approaching all things anthropological.” In other words, he delimits “the intellectual passage” and differentiates “the field of discourse” (Geertz, 2002, p. 32-33).⁶ Clifford states, “Clearly, Lévi-Strauss is one of the real authors of anthropology – perhaps the most real, if originality was everything” (Geertz, 2002, p. 43).

Tristes Tropiques is a work *sui generis*. As a text it can be classified in different ways. Geertz (2002, p. 50), in a suggestive chapter of his *Works and Lives: The anthropologist as author*, called “The World in a Text: How to read ‘Tristes

⁵ The relation writing/*pharmakon* is worked over by Derrida in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *La Dissémination* (Derrida, 1972).

⁶ The others are Boas, Benedict, Malinowski, Murdock, Evans-Pritchard, and Griaule. For Geertz (2002, p. 32), basing himself in the Foucauldian definition of an author, the founders of discursivity not only produce their works, but, by producing them, “produce something more: the possibility and the rules for creating other texts.”

Tropiques’,” says that the book in question “consists in diverse books at the same time, various types of different kinds of texts, one superimposed on top of others.” The ideal-typical Russian/Czech formalist poem” which is what *Tristes Tropiques* is, according to Geertz, is also simultaneously “a travel book,” “an ethnographic text,” “a philosophic work” and “a reformist treatise” (Geertz, 2002, p. 51-52, 54, 56, 58).

Tristes Tropiques is a work belonging to French travel literature, one that paradoxically begins by negating travel. That genre provides the author with a certain enunciative freedom that ends up exposing the central elements to his thought. The scientist lowers his guard and, in that way, furnishes the reader a beautiful point of entry into the subjective dispositions that order the work. Geertz (2002, p. 50) insightfully observes that *Tristes Tropiques*, “in terms of textual construction,” (would be?) “the arch-text from which, in a logical sense, others are generated.”

It is curious and symptomatic that in that literary climate Lévi-Strauss conceives the germ of a theory of writing that later was developed “scientifically” in *Primitivos e Civilizados* (Charbonnier, 1989), in *Lugar da Antropologia nas Ciências Sociais e Problemas Colocados por seu Ensino* (Lévi-Strauss, 1975, v. 1) and in *O Tempo Redescoberto* (Lévi-Strauss, 1970). Even if Lévi-Strauss wrote only a few pages on writing, as Derrida notes (1999, p. 127-128), they are notwithstanding:

[...] notable with respect to various aspects: of great beauty and made to frighten, enunciated in the form of paradox, and of a modernity the anathema of what the West obstinately retook, the exclusion by which he constituted himself and became recognized, from the *Fedro* to the *Curso de lingüística geral*.

We will now try to delineate the terms of the lesson on writing, rigorously following its textual construction, whose structure and account are, as Johnson (2001, p. 11) well notes, “more narrative than argumentative.”

Everything happens during a long and wearisome trip to the village Utiariti, where there was going to be held “a type of reunion with other related or allied tribes,” which gave the opportunity for the anthropologist to make demographic estimates of the population.

The atmosphere of the reunion was tense and distrustful. At night, nobody slept, “everyone spent the night watching, discretely. It would have not been wise to prolong the adventure,” recounts Lévi-Strauss, who insisted “together with the Chief that the exchange [of presents] should proceed without delay.” That is when he witness an “extraordinary incident”: the appearance of writing among the Nambikwara (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 292). Remember that, for us phonocentric Westerners, the Nambikwara were a people without writing.

Before narrating the extraordinary incident, the anthropologist says he is obliged “to return back a little” and remembers an experiment that he did among the Nambikwara. He relates:

It is thought that the Nambikwara do not know how to write or draw, with the exception of some dots or zigzags they draw on their heads. Just like among the Caduveo. At any rate, I distributed pieces of paper and pencils, which they initially did nothing with; afterward, one day, I saw everyone busy tracing undulated horizontal lines on the pieces of paper (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 292).

“What did they want to do?” asks the anthropologist.

I had to give into the evidence, they were writing, or more exactly they tried to use the pencils as I did, giving them the only utility that they could conceive, because I had not yet tried to distract them with my drawings. Most of them stopped there, but the chief of the tribe went further. He was perhaps the only one that understood the purpose of writing. So, he asked me for a notebook such that we were equipped in the same way when we worked together. He would not communicate with me verbally the answers to the questions that I asked, but rather would trace wavy lines on the page and presented them to me as if I should be able to read his answers. He himself was rather taken by his act; every time that he finished drawing a line, he examined it anxiously, as if the meaning should burst from it; and every time the same disillusionment always showed on his face. But he didn't admit it; it was tacitly understood between us that his scribbling possessed a meaning that I pretended to decipher; a verbal commentary would almost immediately follow that would save me from demanding the necessary clarifications (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 293).

Having finished his flash-back, Lévi-Strauss begins his narrative of the extraordinary incident. In the moment that the presents are being distributed, the Chief:

[...] having poorly congregated his people, pulled out from a basket a piece of paper covered with crooked lines that he pretended to read and amongst which he sought, with a feigned hesitation, the list of objects that I should give in exchange for the presents offered: to this person, for a bow and arrow, a sable for cutting? To somebody else, pearls (!) for their necklaces... That comedy lasted for two hours (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 293).

“What did he want?” asks Lévi-Strauss

To fool himself, maybe; but even more to frighten his companions, persuade them that the gifts passed through his intermediary, that he had obtained an alliance with the White Man and participated in his secrets (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 293).

The narrative of the scene of the extraordinary incident begins with the narrative of another “incident,” qualified as “a ridiculous” one, where he finds himself “suddenly alone in the brush” due to a problem with his mule that “had sores and suffered from its mouth.” After shooting his shotgun three times, running his mule crazily in whatever direction that it would run, losing his equipment, an act that left him “demoralized,” Lévi-Strauss is finally found by the natives, who also find his equipment, all this “for them [but] a children's game” (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 293-294).

After returning to camp, “still tormented by that ridiculous incident,” he records that he slept poorly and that he battled his insomnia by “remembering the scene of exchanges.” Fooling the threatening night with the security of memory and of an internal world, he reflects upon the appearance of writing:

The written had, in fact, made its appearance among the Nambikwara; but not as it would have been imagined, at the end of a laborious learning process. Its symbols were being used, at the same time that its reality continued to be strange. What was maintained in view was a more sociological than intellectual end. It was not a matter of getting to know, to retain or understand, but rather to

increment the prestige and authority of an individual – or a function – at the expense of another (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 294).

After some empirical considerations with respect to the development of writing as a social institution, Lévi-Strauss unfolds a second instance of his nocturnal meditation. It has to do with a philosophical reflection on the nature and function of writing:

It is a strange thing, writing. It apparently appears that its emergence would not stop precipitating profound changes in the conditions of existence of humanity; and that those transformations should be principally of an intellectual nature. The possession of writing multiplies enormously the aptitude of men to preserve knowledge. We could consider it good naturedly as an artificial memory, whose development should be accompanied by a better consciousness of the past, thus improving the capacity to organize the present and future (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 295).

He continues his reflection along the length of his narrative sequence, in the direction of the movement of history and the historical temperatures of societies. In a species of *avant-première* of the hard core of structuralism, he writes:

After having eliminated all of the proposed criteria for making the distinction between savagery and civilization, we would like to retain at least this one: people with or without writing, those able to accumulate historical acquisitions and proceed ever faster to the mark that they have set, while others, unable to retain the past beyond the boundary that individual memory is sufficient in setting, remain prisoners in a fluctuating history in which an origin would always be missing as well as a lasting consciousness of a project. However, nothing that we know about writing and its role in evolution justifies such a conception. One of the most creative phases in the history of humanity is located during the beginning of the Neolithic age: responsible for agriculture, domestication of animals and other arts (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 295).

At the end of the meditation we come to a strong moment of Lévi-Strauss' narrative. It is the formulation of his hypothesis with respect to the function of writing, namely that it serves to exploit man by man, to enslave him. The correlation between the appearance of writing and "certain characteristic traces of civilization" lay

[...] in the formation of cities and empires, that is, the integration of a political system of a considerable number of individuals and their hierarchization in casts and classes. In any case, that is the typical evolution that is present from Egypt to China, when writing emerges: it appears to favor the exploitation of men, before their enlightenment. [...] If my hypothesis were correct, then it is necessary to admit that the primary function of written communication is that of facilitating slavery. The employing of writing for disinterested ends, with the view of extracting from it intellectual and aesthetic satisfactions is a secondary result, if it is not reduced, in the majority of cases, as a means of reinforcing, justifying, or dissimulating the other function (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 296).

After the nocturnal meditation, and having concluded the narrative on the appearance of writing among the Nambikwara, Lévi-Strauss retakes the “extraordinary incident” in order, in a type of ethical-political *mea culpa*, to save innocent speech, authentic and non-oppressive oral cultures from violence, oppression, and the monopoly that Western societies have on writing. It is also a compliment paid to the wise Nambikwara that bravely resist writing and the Chief’s mystifications:

Those who distanced themselves from the Chief, after he tried to play the card of civilization (following my visit, he was abandoned by the majority of his people), confusedly understood that writing and treason penetrated amongst them with a strong hand (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 297).

IV

All the complexity of the problem of writing in anthropology is deepened, exceeded, and multiplied by the interpolation of *A Writing Lesson* done by Derrida.⁷

Derrida’s interest in *Tristes Tropiques* is given to the degree that in this text, precisely in one of its ethnographic chapters dedicated to the Nambikwara, Lévi-Strauss constructs a theory of writing.

A Writing Lesson, according to Derrida (1999, p. 132), “marks an episode which could be denominated the ethnological war,” that is, “the essential confrontation that opens up communication between people and cultures, even though this communication is not practiced over the sign of colonial or missionary oppression.” It is then a story made “in the register of contained or deferred violence, silent at times, but always oppressive and heavy” (Derrida, 1999, p. 132). Ordinary and complex violence is effected by a disguised and anti-ethnocentric ethnocentrism, by a movement that negates itself and appears in Lévi-Strauss’ argument when he repeats one of the founding acts of Western metaphysics, that is, the critical negation of writing understood as a violent externality. His is a gesture that points to the inheritance he assumes and the homage he gives to him who he called the “founder of the science of man,” him who Derrida denominates “the name of the problem,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau. If for Lévi-Strauss, Rousseau, “passionate reader of travel books” (sic!) and “careful analyst of exotic customs and beliefs” was who conceived, desired, and heralded ethnology “a whole century before it made its appearance” (Lévi-Strauss, 1975, v. 2, p. 41), then for Derrida (1999, p. 123), Rousseau was “the only, or the first, to make of writing a topic and system, one that became the model for a whole age.”

Daughter of a long tradition that goes from Plato to Saussure, the notion of writing as exteriority and reduction is completely visible (although always contradictorily), in the Rousseauian foundation of Lévi-Strauss’ theorizing. To writing, as an external and corrupting agent, corresponds an authentic native speech. That type of discursive strategy would indicate the existence of a perennial speech ethic in the work of Lévi-Strauss, who selectively considers determined elements of a system as

⁷ As is peculiar with Derridian writing, his text follows closely Lévi-Strauss’ text, wrapping it in his own argument, at the same time that it puts forth the hidden law that orders its construction, structure whose hiding is a necessary condition of everything that Lévi-Strauss shows. According to Derrida (1971, p. 235), “the quality and fecundity of a discourse is measured perhaps by the critical rigor with which this relationship with the history of metaphysics is thought and concepts inherited. It has to do with a critical relation with the language of the social sciences and of a critical responsibility with the very discourse. It has to do with expressly and systematically placing the problem of the founding of a discourse that is going to search for an inheritance the necessary resources for the deconstruction of that very inheritance. A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.”

being non-essential and noxious to it. Metaphorically inflating “writing” and “speech,” he organizes two exclusionary series, where what is essential and complete opposes what is formal and mediated.

Such a discourse/argument is, as Johnson (2001, p. 23) clearly synthesizes, animated by the desire that “a binary distinction, between black and white, should exist between speech and writing, the first as a means of authentic and proximate communication and the second as an un-natural and violent alienation of the voice.” Still, as Derrida demonstrates, that which is said to belong to the first pole is also observed to belong to the opposite pole, indicating, in that way, that every presence of speech is always already inhabited by the germ of writing.

In the Derridian perspective, the Lévi-Straussian discourse/argument unfolds through the repetition of a law, by the metaphorical overflowing of two initial poles into two rather closed series, that have writing and voice as their origin, and that adhere to the following equation: [writing: externality: violence: inauthenticity: culture: absence] :: [voice: interiority: innocence: authenticity: nature: presence].

In Lévi-Strauss’ theory of writing, as Derrida demonstrates, writing, violence, and difference – typical markers of mediation and absence (of authentic speech, of innocence, and of native identity) – were already there, in the supposed originary presence, which finally exposes the fact that there never was an origin present to itself, and that the origin is always but this movement to defer and postpone, that functionally transforms absence and relation into founding presence and identity.

Let’s see, following his traces, how Derrida deconstructs *A Writing Lesson*, teaching us what the lesson is in the lesson of a lesson.

The extraordinary incident constructs a first level of narration, on which a lesson *of* writing takes place, since it is “of writing teaching of what it deals,” in other words:

The Nambikwara Chief learns writing from the anthropologist, he learns it from the beginning without understanding, or more appropriately he mimics the writer from whom he understands the function of writing, or better, understands its profound function of enslaving before understanding its function, here accessory, of communication, of signification, of a tradition of signification (Derrida, 1999, p. 150).

It has to do, then, with a historical situation, empirical and observable, where the extraordinary incident interrupts an ordinary succession of events and is perceived by the anthropologist as the fruit of an apparent learned behavior that arises as a comic initiation and imitation.

The parable takes then a synthetic dimension, including within it, according to Derrida (1999, p. 155), all the organic complexity of the phenomenon of writing: the hierarchization, the taking advantage of the mediation of an outsider, and the participation in a secret. These constitute a triple function enacted by the Chief, even without the real understanding of the intelligible bases of the system that made them possible. This is a fact that opens up a space for the narrative of the lesson *of* writing, that is:

[...] the teaching that the ethnologist believes he can induce from the incident during the course of a long meditation, when, struggling against insomnia, reflects on the origin, the function, and the meaning of writing. Having taught the gesture of writing to a Nambikwara Chief that learned without

understanding, the ethnologist, for his part, understands then that he taught the Chief to draw out the lesson from writing itself (Derrida, 1999, p. 150).

The lesson *of* writing is composed, in that way, of two moments: an empirical relation of a perception, that is “the scene of an extraordinary incident,” and “a reflection historical-philosophical on the scene of writing and the profound meaning of the incident, of the closed history of writing” that occurs during the night of insomnia (Derrida, 1999, p. 150). It is worth saying, then, that the lesson *of* writing does not involve any more the experience lived by the anthropologist and the indigenous chief, but rather the solitary memories of the intellectual, observed by the present absence of his reader, the new student of that new lesson. It goes to the theoretical level, metadiscursive, where the incident will assume its extraordinary character, domesticated and routinized by a “lesson of the lesson.”

Lévi-Strauss’ discourse concerning the appearance of writing among the Nambikwara anchors, for Derrida, an argument about the epigeneticism of writing, based on a discursive economy that goes from inside to outside and *visa versa*. “The appearance of writing is *instantaneous*,” “it is not prepared for.” Such a jump “would prove that the possibility of writing does not inhabit speech, but rather the outside of speech,” that appearance does not refer to an origin of writing, but rather its “imitation” and even more its “importation,” or its being “borrowed” (Derrida, 1999, p. 156). In other words, the appearance of writing among the Nambikwara is a fictional and instantaneous movement – a comedy by the Chief – and not a laborious internal development of the native culture. In synthesis, the first lesson of the lesson is of the meaning of writing as externality, as the outside of speech.

The significance of writing as externality and fiction makes Lévi-Strauss, according to Derrida, give his parable a new cut, and unfold his first dichotomy (speech/writing) into a new one between sociological and intellectual ends. The argument goes as follows:

Since they learned without understanding, since the Chief effectively used writing without knowing either its function or its signified content, it follows that the finality of writing is political and not theoretical, “*sociological more than intellectual*” (Derrida, 1999, p. 156, italics by the author).

The comedy enacted by the Chief unveils a profound truth that constitutes the second lesson of the lesson, that is the political character of writing, its power to enslave.

Having enunciated the power to enslave of writing, the sequence of Lévi-Strauss’ argument comes from a “secondary current of meditation” – that concerning the historical movement and historical temperatures – Lévi-Strauss, according to Derrida, neutralizes “the border between people with or without writing: not with respect to the disposition of writing, but with respect to what was believed could be deduced from this fact, with respect to its historicity or its non-historicity.” Such a neutralization authorizes the appearance in Lévi-Strauss’ narrative, in one stroke, of basic structural themes, that is the “essential and irreducible relativity of the perception of the historical movement;” of “the differences between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ in the ‘historical temperature’ of societies,” and of “the relationship between ethnology and history,” not yet attributing to writing “any pertinence in the appreciation of the historical rhythms and times,” any participation in the so-called “Neolithic revolution,” an era of massive constructions that are still with us today (Derrida, 1999, p. 157-158).

In Derrida's view, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss is profoundly compromised with phonocentrism, being that it establishes its argument on the distinction speech/writing, that is, in the exclusion and reduction of writing, and in the intimate approximation of voice to *logos* (inseparable from the phonetic substance) as origin of the truth of being and lasting presence of meaning. Lévi-Straussian phonologism is made explicit on two fronts: that of the linguistic and phonological model that he utilizes, and that he reduces writing along the length of his whole work. The scene of the appearance of writing among the Nambikwara, over which that text stoops itself, is part of an ample series of examples.

Such phonocentrism, that governs Western thought, constitutes, for Derrida, an ontological-linguistic model that relegates the Subject to listen to him or herself speak of consciousness and reflexivity, a system that is made viable by the inflation of an event that fulfills in law all meaning. Thanks to the fact that, in the moment that one speaks, the spiritual and material meaning present themselves as a unity without fractures, in which the intelligible subsumes the sensible, speech can defend its immediate connection with spirit. In that way:

Written words can appear as marks that the reader should interpret and animate; they can be seen without being understood, those possibilities of aperture are part of their structure. But when I speak, my voice appears to be something external, that I first hear and then understand. To hear and to understand my speech is the same thing (Culler, 1989, p. 107).

As with our "native theory," phonocentrism constructs the possibility of a direct access to thought provided by speech and sound, meaning that, for not manifesting itself in its real external materiality, results in not separating the self from its thoughts. The erasure of meaning in the voice is, in those terms, the very condition of the idea of truth in Western metaphysics. Such a movement articulates a sentiment derived from objectivity – an inferential result of repeated manifestations of meaning – with the supposed existence of a dominance of meaning over appearance. Culler synthesizes the move:

Since truth requires the possibility of a constant meaning, that can manifest itself and remain unaltered and untouched by the vehicle that manifests it, the voice provides for us, as a necessary model (Culler, 1989, p. 108).

A point to the Derridian deconstruction of the Lévi-Straussian construction that is valuable to an anthropological reflection is that where the structure of demonstration of the argument of the celebrated anthropologist with respect to the externality and the enslaving power of writing is exposed. Making evident his frame of dispositions, the philosopher presumes to treat a structure that manipulates paradoxically the division writing/orality, that is brought to light when its instantaneous character is unveiled and, for that reason, external to writing in relation to orality, and dissolved when it finds the truth of the fiction Nambikwara, dissociating the insurgency of scientific progress from written communication and confirming the hypothesis of the oppressive function of writing without compromising the scientific character of the point from which the author speaks. A complex game, that reveals and hides:

The traditional and basic ethnocentrism that, inspired by the model of phonetic writing, splits writing from speech is then manipulated and thought as anti-

ethnocentrism. It sustains an ethico-political accusation: the exploitation of man by man is a deed of Western writing cultures (Derrida, 1999, p. 149-150).

We are, then, at the very core of the historical and epistemic constitution of anthropology that, according to Derrida, with whom we agree completely, “only had conditions to be born as a science the moment that it operated a decentering,” in other words, when European culture – “and as a consequence the history of Metaphysics and its concepts – was dislocated, expelled from its place, becoming to be considered the culture of reference.” Still, and by effect of its foundational paradox, anthropology is before anything a “European science” that utilizes, “although defending itself against them, the concepts of the Western tradition” (read as the metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism). By way of consequence, the anthropologist collects in his or her discourse – whether desired or not, because it does not depend on a personal decision – “the premises of ethnocentrism in the very same moment that they are denounced” (Derrida, 1971, p. 234-235).⁸

V

To common sense anthropology, and specifically ethnography, as Clifford (1998, p. 88) writes, “translates experience and discourse into writing.” That is exactly what we saw in a paradigmatic form in *Tristes Tropiques*. Notwithstanding, such common sense is not, Clifford reminds us, “innocent.” That was exactly what Derrida showed us by analyzing *A Writing Lesson* as a textual practice (“a text always gives itself a certain representation of its roots” that, in its own way, “simply subsists by these representations”). He gave with *A Writing Lesson* a double lesson that can be synthesized as follows: 1) what subverts a text is frequently that which, being hidden, makes the text; 2) that which is hidden is a notion of writing as a reduction and mere replacement of speech (Derrida, 1999, p. 126). That lesson applied to ethnography, in the terms of Clifford, unveils for us: 1) the passage of orality to writing, crucial for the history of the West, is exactly where anthropology situates its practice; 2) that passage is a powerful story (read allegory) that is at the core of what he calls the pastoral mode of ethnography. In the last instance, then, it is as Clifford (1998, p. 93) synthesizes, “the notion that writing is a corruption, that something unredeemable pure is lost when the world of culture is textualized is, after Derrida, seen as a diffuse and contestable Western allegory.”

We have arrived here to what we consider (the authors of this text) as a neurotic point, namely a reflection on the theory of signification that underlies ethnography. One that has to do with a theory of signification of a phonocentric type that anthropology evidences, as we noted in the introduction, on two privileged fronts. The first, the experience-present of the other corresponds, for us (the authors of this text), to fieldwork, and the experience of the other-as-presence to participant observation, where culture presents itself as orality. We consider those fronts as corresponding, also and respectively, to the “outside” and “before” of the ethnographic text. A possible formulation of the theory of signification of anthropology, taken as our native theory, would be: [experience-present of other: fieldwork: outside of ethnographic text] :: [experience of other-as-presence: participant observation: before the ethnographic text] :: [writing: externality: violence: inauthenticity: culture: absence] :: [voice: interiority: innocence: authenticity: nature: presence].

⁸ The founding paradox of anthropology is considered by Derrida as an irreducible necessity, in that way not a historical contingency.

Our (anthropology's) theory of signification takes voice as a complete vehicle of experience of the other, that is, of difference. In such a scheme of intelligibility, voice is manifested, initially, when articulated in the field by the anthropologist; still, later, it will be supplanted by the dead marks of writing. There would then be, according with our (that of the authors of this text) argument, an approximation of voice by means of the intuitive experience of the other, to the truth postponed by the text. Maintained, in this way, is the belief in the direct relation of voice with meaning, in the spontaneous and almost-transparent sign, and in empathy with others by means of the "breath of the spirit." What is ignored is that writing, like Derrida demonstrates, can only have such a compensatory supplementing character, in relation to speech, because speech was always marked by the general qualities afflicting writing: absence, uncertainty, materiality, and externality.

On the other hand, perceived as an object of the anthropological gaze, voice comes to crystallize itself as "oral culture." No longer do we see (we, the authors of this text) voice as an authentic vehicle, but as a sign of authenticity itself, or of "what belongs." The ethnographic text would appear, then, as writing, as has already been mentioned, savior of a voice present-to-itself, authentic substance of a communicative model destined to oblivion. According to Clifford (1998, p. 87), the aspect most problematic and politically weighted of redemption "is its untiring allocation of others in a present-that-is-turning-into-past."

The ethical content of such a perception would position anthropology in a countercultural role, the textual redemption of difference against the attacks of the civilization of which it forms part. Defending a textually anterior other, anthropology would constitute itself as an "outside" in the face of its own historical provenance: the nation-state and colonialism. It should be said that the allegory of redemption, metamorphosed into the pastoral of salvation, generates an ethic of speech that, as revealed in *A Writing Lesson*, is attributed, we propose, to a fundamental bait: that of finding in the speech of the other the example of presence (dominated), revealing the nostalgia of a fullness already long-time lost in our modern Western world of absence, fragmentation, and virtuality.

Defending the theme of a constitutive violence and of a morality originating in a opening, or in a "between-signs," Derrida (1981, p. 171) shows an "ethic of writing," where the paradoxes of anthropology can find a beautiful point of resonance and reflection:

Recognizing writing in speech, that is, a "différance" and an absence of speech, is to begin to think the bait.⁹ There is no ethics without the presence of others, and as also follows, without absence, dissimulation, deviance, "différance," writing. The arch-writing is the origin of morality as immorality,¹⁰ a non-ethical opening of ethics, a violent opening. As was done in relation to the vulgar

⁹ "Différance' is a systematic game of differences, of traces of difference, of openings (spacings) by means of which elements are related between themselves. This spacing is a simultaneous production active and passive of intervals (the 'a' of 'différance' indicates this indecision that concerns the activity and the passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) without which the integral terms would not signify, would not function" (Derrida, 1981, p. 27).

¹⁰ The arch-writing is "the first writing, not in the sense of historical precedence to the pronounced word, but which comes before spoken language and vulgar writing" (Santiago, 1976, p. 11).

concept of writing, it is without a doubt necessary to rigorously suspend the ethical instance of violence in order to repeat the genealogy of morals.¹¹

Arguing for the complexity of the symbolic economy that moves the “outside” of anthropological discourse, and that positions it as a presymbolic and prediscursive datum, Derrida’s thought problematizes in a very clear fashion the noble anthropological intention of “giving voice” to the other. He illuminates, in that way, the tensions of a complex and paradoxical move that presumes to “give” to the other, by means of relationship with, and writing about, their own speaking presence, obtained as a no-relation expressed with respect to “voice.” Reconstructing the distant memory, a genealogy, of a gesture apparently still so contemporary, the philosopher unveils the “rooting function” of our others (the objects of anthropological study), that we (the anthropologists) have served by speaking to their silence, collecting an identity that “belongs” to our Western history and to our own desires.

If ethnography is no more than the setting of this passage of orality to writing, whether wanting it or not, it does not depend on the private decision of the ethnographer, it is because by writing (supplement, artifice, exteriority) he or she is able to redeem and saves voice (authentic substance) of the other. In other words, not only is “il n’y a pas hors texte” (Derrida, 1999, p. 194) as the very text, what belongs to it is textualization.

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¹¹ For Derrida (1971, p. 69), the vulgar concept of writing can only historically impose itself by dissimulating arch-writing, “by the desire of a speech expelling its other and its double and working to reduce its difference.”

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