

What Is “Indigenous”? — or “A Silence Made of Many Doors”

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First of all, I would like to thank the Research Centre in Biodiversity and Genetic Resources, in the person of Prof. Carlos Pereira, for the kind invitation to say a few introductory words at this conference, “More Than Words: A Celebration of African Languages on the Occasion of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (the UNESCO) International Year of the Indigenous Languages”. But, before I begin, let me tell you that my field of research is poetry and poetics. I am neither a linguist nor an anthropologist, even if I have developed a few research projects based on ethnography. You were probably too bold in inviting me... And I was probably too reckless in accepting... So, please bear with me!

This having been said, I must however confess that I cannot understand poetry and poetics as any other thing besides another field to reflect upon the complexity of human language and the violence always implied in its existence. If you think about it, the first violence of language¹ happens immediately at the moment of our birth — the moment we gain breath. That is the moment of our first cry — simultaneously, the moment of our first sound. The beginning of language is thus our first creation: the creation of our own life. The beginning of language is therefore the beginning of life. Charles Olson (an American poet, involved with anthropological research on the indigenous American languages and cultures), speaking of this coincident creative moment of breath and sound, said, in his famous essay of 1950, “Projective Verse”:

[...] the projective act, which is the artist’s act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man. For a man’s problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. This is not easy. Nature works from reverence, even in her destructions (species go down with a crash). But breath is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended.

¹ On “the violence of language”, see LECERCLE, Jean-Jacques. *The Violence of Language*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all of that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.²

When we are born, we all speak from these roots, from the roots in our physiology, from the size nature has given us. And I would like to take Olson's words — “to speak from these roots” — to refer to a second violence. That is the violence imposed on us — from the moment of that natural reality of newborns onwards — by all the sounds and all the meanings already waiting for us. We *fall* (literally, on the Biblical sense too) into this language of the community. In this sense, we abandon (better said, we are made to abandon) the natural, free, and creative size of the roots in our physiology — to imitate, as Aristotle pointed out, the words and meanings around us. From then onwards, as French poet Arthur Rimbaud repeatably claimed, words make us blind — but we still need the alchemy of the Word to be able to see.³

We look at the world *with* and *through* these words and their meanings — words and meanings baked in the ovens of history, meanings and words told by the victors. Beyond the violence of words and/or meanings already imposed on us by the language of our own community (by history, by unfair economic systems, by religion, by men, etc. — that is, by the winners of a “common”-sense), what can we say when another violence of language is imposed by colonialism, by “superior civilizations” imposing on old civilizations? As another poet, William Butler Yeats put it, in his famous “Lapis Lazuli” poem:

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
Old civilizations put to the sword.⁴

Yeats, an Irishman and a contemporary of the two 20th century World Wars, knew what he was talking about, but he used as an example the Greek and the Chinese. Was, or is, there any history of any human community exempt of these violent migrant or colonial movements? Even when this violence finds more subtle forms to impose words

² OLSON, Charles, “Projective Verse”, in *Selected Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 25.

³ RIMBAUD, Arthur. *A Season in Hell and Other Works/Une Saison en Enfer et Oeuvres Diverses* (Dover Dual Language French/English). Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003.

⁴ YEATS, William Butler, “Lapis Lazuli”: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43297/lapis-lazuli>

and meanings on us? How many languages are here in this room? And yet we are all speaking in English...

But Yeats's (one might say, with Olson and Rimbaud) was the celebration of the possibility humankind kept to work in that area where nature had given him size, to go on speaking from those roots — and be able to build new visions of the world, to build peace and happiness. And that happens through art and poetry.

This is the end of “Lapis Lazuli”:

(...)
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.⁵

This is also the role of language. I like to think about it as a form of resistance, as a potential for a counter-violence against any form of power. Language allows us to work with those roots — with a power of a totally different nature —, and create beauty, truth, life.

On the UNESCO site on the International Year of Indigenous Languages, we read:

Through language, people preserve their community's history, customs and traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking, meaning and expression. They also use it to construct their future.⁶

To construct the future, one needs language potentialities to create. One needs to speak from roots that are creative and/or projective.

The UNESCO continues, speaking of indigenous languages:

Many of us take it for granted that we can conduct our lives in our home languages without any constraints or prejudice. But this is not the case for everyone. (...)

Yet many of these [indigenous] languages are disappearing at an alarming rate, as the communities speaking them are confronted with assimilation, enforced relocation, educational disadvantage, poverty, illiteracy, migration and other forms of discrimination and human rights violations.⁷

⁵ *Idem, ibidem.*

⁶ <https://en.iyil2019.org/>

⁷ *Ibidem*

Which lead me to another issue: what is then the meaning of “indigenous” languages?

This is what I found in some dictionaries:

Indigenous - originating or occurring *naturally*⁸ in a particular place; native.
- produced, growing, living, or occurring *natively* or *naturally*⁹ in a particular region or environment

(question 1: “naturally” means what? Without cultural and historical processes?)

But there’s more:

Indigenous - naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place

(question 2 & 3: how do we know that our own ancestors didn’t arrive from another place? How far should we go in our ancestry?)

Let me go on:

Indigenous - operating or happening in the local area, not in other countries
- generally refers to people who have lived in a place or country for a *very long time*,¹⁰ or to plants and animals that developed in a place rather than arriving from somewhere else. Indigenous populations are descended from the *original*¹¹ inhabitants of a place and often preserve traditional ways of life.
- of or relating to the people who have been in a region from *the earliest time*.¹²

(questions 4 & 5: what is the meaning of “very long time” or “earliest time”? in relation to what time? What is the meaning of “original”? In the case of the Portuguese, the Iberians and/or the Lusitanian are considered to be the first, but they were in touch with the Phoenicians — who, by the way, named us, Iberia [land of rabbits] — how can we be sure about the origin of the original? Where does that invention start?)

And just to end:

- *Indigenous*: being the first or earliest *known*¹³ of its kind present in a region.

⁸ My emphasis.

⁹ My emphasis.

¹⁰ My emphasis.

¹¹ My emphasis.

¹² My emphasis.

¹³ My emphasis.

(question 6 — which leads me to the point I am trying to make: *known* by whom?)

Obviously by those who had the power to designate, the power to name: “More than words”, the power of words is what is at stake. The unequal power relations and the lack of reciprocity inaugurated by a certain idea of modernity is what is at stake when we speak — even if with very good intentions, like the UNESCO — of being “indigenous”.

The question becomes: once you get rid of those very subjective categories (naturally, originally, earliest, etc.), aren't we all speaking indigenous languages? Languages produced, growing, living, or occurring in a particular region or environment?

And the most interesting definition of “indigenous” that I have found in the dictionaries was:

- the Latin 'indigena' meaning 'a native' was developed in mid 17th century English to carry the meaning it has today.¹⁴

This is the lack of reciprocity that our Western Modernity, established by the 17th century rationale, is based upon: a modernity based on the European power to designate/to name the rest of the world¹⁵ was (is) what allowed us to look with a word like “indigenous” at the rest of the world that we, Europeans, had been encountering in the 15th and 16th centuries. And this violence of language is the ultimate violence of colonialism. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a Portuguese social scientist, argues for the need to go beyond modernity's abyssal thinking in favor of new ecologies of knowledges. According to him, modernity's abyssal thinking accepts its opposites in view — but dismisses whatever is considered as incommensurable and/or incomprehensible content:

(...) the other side of the line vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other (...) To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality.(...) The visible line that separates science from its modern others is grounded on the abyssal invisible line that separates science, philosophy, and theology, on one side, from, on the other, knowledges rendered incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of

¹⁴ My emphasis.

¹⁵ Cf. SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa, “Modernidade, Identidade e a Cultura de Fronteira”, in *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, # 38, 1993, or, more recently, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018.

philosophy and theology. (...) This [is] the radical denial of copresence (...) — they can in no way be considered true or false.¹⁶

If you think about it, isn't this what "indigenous" means?

This is not what Charles Olson was talking about when he spoke of language as a dimension larger than man, to take(s) speech up in all its fullness, to take its place alongside the things of nature, language (as one of man's) proudest acts, to speak from these roots, the size nature has given us, breath and sound as freedom and life. To go beyond the violence of language, Olson could only find the potency of poetry — what a friend of his, the American poet Robert Duncan referred as "wrestling with Form to liberate Form".¹⁷ This struggle is exercised by all of us, using the potency of poetry and poetics. Because one must remember what is the meaning of "poiein", the etymological meaning for poetry, and that is, simply: "to make". Words make things happen, but words are, in themselves, a making, an action. Indigenous — I would like to propose, as a form for this action — only means the produced "nonexistent" Other of Western Modernity. Yet, this Other/Indigenous must be included in the community of the human precisely because it is incommensurable and/or incomprehensible to us, white modern western (and I'm tempted to add "male") people.

Words, if used seriously, as Olson wanted us — if used poetically, I would dare to translate — have a radically emancipatory character: they can lead us to the searching for alternatives to the hegemonic paradigm, in terms of the models of language and/or of thought implied in what we might call "the consciousness of the community of the human".¹⁸ This must confront the common-sense, the meanings we take for granted — like with the word "indigenous".

Poetic action can thus lead us to a process based on/ruled by a rhizomatic lack of a center, by a nomadic dynamics of incompleteness in which both language and subject are situated in an analytical context framed by the new discoveries of contemporary science, but also by philosophy and the humanities. This is a research process, archaeological and genealogical, questioning dominant forms of language, arguing for the need of decentering — arguing for a dis-territory as the only possibility, the only

¹⁶ SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges": <https://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/AbyssalThinking.pdf>

¹⁷ DUNCAN, Robert, "The Truth and Life of Myth", in *Fictive Certainties*. New York: New Directions, 1985, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Idem, ibidem.*

possibility for the survival of the tribe, the only possibility for the survival of the community.

The UNESCO goes on:

Given the complex systems of knowledge and culture developed and accumulated by these local languages over thousands of years, their disappearance would amount to losing a kind of cultural treasure. It would deprive us of the rich diversity they add to our world and the ecological, economic and sociocultural contribution they make.

It is necessary to bring back whatever was given the nonexistence status, like the epistemological dimensions of indigenous languages. What is also at stake is the social responsibility of science and of scientists, the social responsibility of the experts, of the producers of knowledge and of information, and their relation to the development of the citizens' forms of public and more democratic participation, in a way that will make possible to reconcile the diverse knowledges with the rights of all of the world's citizens and with democracy. So, yes, the disappearance of complex systems of knowledge and culture developed and accumulated by these "indigenous" languages over thousands of years amounts to losing an enormous cultural treasure. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, a major language philosopher of the 20th century, claimed, to imagine a language is the same as to imagine a form of life.¹⁹

So, what happens when a language disappears?

The disappearance of a language is the disappearance of an entire form of life — it is the disappearance of an entire world. And this is also what "more than words" means! In words, yes, always. As much "down to earth" as possible!

Nowadays, facing ecological catastrophes all around the world, the new trade wars between nations owning atomic weapons, the imminent end of oil energy, we are, probably more than in any other period in history, faced with the need for another conception of language. In the 60s, another poet, Robert Duncan, was already saying:

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When such critics would bring the flight of imagination down to earth, they mean not the earth men have revered and worked with love and awe, the

¹⁹ "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life", in WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations* (19). Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, p. 8.

imagined earth, but the real estate modern man has made of Earth for his own uses. (...) In a time when only one vision — the vision of an atomic disaster and the end of species — haunts the world, in religion as well as in science, men labor to exorcize all the old stories. The spiritual and political promise of the day is that nothing will happen. The theater now must be not the theater of the most true but the theatre of the absurd.²⁰

Let me give you an example of what this absurd means: just last week, the TV news showed us another Brazilian Guarani leader who had just been shot, because he was trying to defend his community's right to the land ("the earth men have revered and worked with love and awe"), which was being taken by the powerful timber sector in Brazil. This reminded me of something which happened a few years ago, when I had just arrived to Brazil to do some research: the TV news were showing an old couple from, up until then, a totally unknown community in the Amazonia. No linguists or anthropologists knew the language they were speaking, and experts were trying to understand what they were saying by comparing their language to other languages already studied in that area. Basically, what could be understood was that "the white men had come during the night" — and these two were the only survivors. In the meanwhile, the TV was showing busy lumberjacks and already no sign of any village.

Just another un-natural event, just another illegal occupation, *naturalized* by TV. We have dinner watching things like this — "no big deal", after all it is "far away", with "indigenous" people! Violence and inhuman behavior have become too familiar. We accept these forms of representation of the real, we accept these models of representation in the language — of the media, for instance. But eventually — some of us at least — will feel the pain of an amputated limb which comes from the fanthom objectivity that that construction in language on that screen displays.²¹ That pain becomes very objective and that is, in the end, the violence of a language that leads us back to our own humanity. That old couple was, from then on, the only bards of an extinct community — they became the keepers of certain forms of knowledge, of a world said/seen differently, the keepers of their language. I still wonder if they made it to express their history and culture, learn, defend their human rights and participate in all aspects of a larger society. Unfortunately, I must say I doubt it.

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²⁰ DUNCAN, *ibidem*, p. 5.

²¹ On the question of "fanthom objectivity", see TAUSSIG, Michael. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

According to the UNESCO, there are:

- 7 000 languages spoken worldwide
- 370 million indigenous people
- 90 countries with indigenous communities
- 5 000 different indigenous cultures
- 2 680 languages in danger

What happens to all of the different possibilities that a disappeared language could open for us to see the world anew? What kind of blindness are we imposing upon ourselves when we allow for that kind of violence upon the community of the human? How can we look for the reorientation of possible knowledge? How can we *listen* to “a silence made of so many doors”?²² I am, again, quoting from a poem, this time by a major Cape Verdean poet, recently disappeared, Corsino Fortes. We are also celebrating the African languages, aren't we?

Corsino Fortes fought against Portuguese colonialism and his poetry, especially the famous poem I am quoting from, points to that experience of colonialism. Fortes used many creole words woven in the Portuguese, and I love his work precisely because of that “incommensurable and/or incomprehensible” dimensions which were (still are) constructed as non-existent. We cannot reduce this poetry to something familiar or recognizable by any European and/or Westerns standards. We cannot neutralize our lack of a center there — we cannot neutralize that specificity of his culture, of his existence, of his resistance, of his language. Because we really cannot speak to each other in that sense. Never did, never will. What is then the only thing we can do respond to the challenges of the UNESCO in the five key areas identified? Which are:



1. Increasing understanding, reconciliation and international cooperation.
2. Creation of favourable conditions for knowledge-sharing and dissemination of good practices with regards to indigenous languages.
3. Integration of indigenous languages into standard setting.
4. Empowerment through capacity building.
5. Growth and development through elaboration of new knowledge

²² FORTES, Corsino, “Letter from Bia d’Ideal”, <http://mildredbarya.com/cape-verde-with-corsino-fortes/> Other than the Portuguese, which already includes some words in the language Corsino Fortes spoke — they call it ‘creole’ — there is the original version in that language. For those versions, see also FORTES, Corsino. *A Cabeça Calva de Deus*. Lisboa: D. Quixote, 2001, pp. 18-25.

Knowing that we cannot really speak transparently to each other, that we really cannot neutralize the “incommensurable and/or incomprehensible” dimension of that *other* language and/or of that language of the *Other*, how can we respond to these challenges? I can only find a way, and that is: we can finally start *listening* — the most difficult exercise of all! Let me then finish by inviting us all to *listen* to Cape Verdean poet Corsino Fortes, to his words, and, “more than words”, to the silences in his poetry — “silence(s) made of many doors”:

Letter from Bia d’Ideal

(translation by Daniel Hahn & Sean O’Brien)²³

The 19th of the month
to windward of the souls that know me

Junzin! Even to the people San Vicente
Your name is Vario or T. Thio Thiofe
And I, Corsa de David, say
You’ve become a black black Greco-Latin man
But really – really

The waves
already climb
the steps of your poem
And inside the guitar of the island
The roofs of Europe
break over our heads

Junzin! A long time now
Since you drank the waters
Of our thirst
It’s true — it’s true
Years upon years
plus five years more, then a day

That the sponge of our hearts has wet the rock
And a conch of milk holds a thread of blood
Oh the pain of a cheerful man!
silent pain
pain in repose
pain cast out
but pain always

The ache of the viola’s note
Ache of the seed in the earth
Ache of the volcanic heart
but today

²³ See previous footnote.

I will not say
 merci
 thank you
 danke schön
 Why?

When Djosa
 went out of the door
 with his shoeshine box

Tanha died by the flag at the gate
With the apple hunger stuck in her mouth

Oh people of the Rua de Craca
Fed

 on fish-broth for 16 tostãos
You all gather to hear
 Patrada's viola
 and
 Antonzin's guitar

Open in the blood of Tanha
 *A silence made of many doors*²⁴

You gather to see
 the ship's mast
 and
 the ship's canvas

Torn
 breaking
 in Tanha's eyes
 Why! When Djosa

Opened in the city
 the sun's open road

Tanha sowed the wind
 with the bitten apple in her mouth

Junzin! Three things
 are bound to my soul
Three rivers for nevermore
 first written on the hand
 then written in the mouth
 then in the blood
on the rock the sun breaks
 the egg of hunger
the wind grinds the stone
 with the flour's white cry
the people and the people's hand
 write the longhand sentence in the earth
And a long time ago

²⁴ My emphasis.

Notcha
was already saying
Saint-John Perse notwithstanding
That it is not always true
“That the oar will break in the oarsman’s hand”

Greetings from Bibia
Bena
Garda
Vavaia

And all the people of the Rua da Crava

Everybody