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“A SILENCE MADE OF MANY DOORS”**

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## **What Is “Indigenous”? — Or “A Silence Made of Many Doors”\*\***

**Abstract:** Starting from the concepts of violence of language and blindness in language, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Arthur Rimbaud, respectively, discussed them, this text aims at debating the meaning of “indigenous” and its implications. That word seems to point to the negation of reciprocities between the ones who discover and the ones who have been “discovered” and seems to relate to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos called the “abyssal thinking” of western modernity. In this vein, I discuss the role of art and poetry as forms of resistance to a vast net of denied reciprocities and as possibilities for the inauguration of new forms of thinking and of language that might go beyond the abyss — in a projective creation, as Charles Olson proposed. This way, art and poetry would point to an ecology of knowledges.

**Keywords:** indigenous, poetry, violence of language, blindness, abyssal thinking, projective poetics, ecology of knowledges.

**Resumo:** A partir dos conceitos de violência da linguagem e de cegueira da linguagem, tal como Jean-Jacques Lecercle e Arthur Rimbaud, respectivamente, os formularam, este texto procura discutir o significado de “indígena” e as implicações que tal designação apresenta, sobretudo na sua evidência de negação de reciprocidade de quem “descobre” a quem “é descoberto” e na relação com o que Boaventura de Sousa Santos chamou o “pensamento abissal” que caracteriza a nossa modernidade ocidental. Neste sentido, discute-se o papel da arte e da poesia como formas de resistência a uma vasta teia de reciprocidades negadas e como possibilidades de inaugurar pensamento e linguagem que vão além do abissal e se façam uma criação projectiva, tal como Charles Olson a propôs, apontando para uma ecologia de saberes.

**Palavras-chave:** indígena, poesia, violência da linguagem, cegueira, pensamento abissal, poética projectiva, ecologia de saberes.

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\*\* Introductory words to the international conference *More Than Words: A Celebration of African Languages on the Occasion of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Year of the Indigenous Languages*, at the Research Center in Biodiversity and Genetic Resources (CIBIO) at the University of Porto, Portugal, 2019.

I must confess that I cannot understand poetry and poetics as any other thing besides as another field to reflect upon the complexity of human language and the violence always implied in its nature. If you think about it, the first violence of language (Lecerle, 1990) 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. 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. 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. (Olson, 1966: 25)

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, and in 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 repeatedly claimed, words make us blind — but we still need the alchemy of the Word to be able to see (Rimbaud, 2003).

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 the white male, 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 (1933) 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.

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 and meanings on us? How many languages are there in a conference room? That doesn't matter, because, in the end, we are all speaking in English...

But Yeats's (one might say, with Olson and Rimbaud) was the celebration of the possibility that humankind kept to work in that area where nature had given size to him, 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.

This is also the role of language, not only of poetry. 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 (UNESCO, 2018), 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.

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

The UNESCO (2018) 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.

Which lead me to another issue: what is then the meaning of “indigenous” languages? This is what I found in some dictionaries:

*Indigenous* - existing *naturally*<sup>1</sup> or having always lived in a place; native. (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary)<sup>2</sup>

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 (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Thesaurus)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indigenous>.

<sup>3</sup> Accessed at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indigenous>.

*Indigenous* - produced, growing, living, or occurring natively or naturally in a particular region or environment (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)<sup>4</sup>

*Indigenous* - belonging to a particular place rather than coming to it from somewhere else (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*)<sup>5</sup>

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

And just to end:

*Indigenous* - relating to or being a people who are the original, earliest known inhabitants of a region, or are their descendants (*Dictionary.com*)<sup>6</sup>

Questions 4 & 5: what is the meaning of “earliest”? In relation to what time? What is the meaning of “original”? In the case of the Portuguese, the Iberians and/or the Lusitanians 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? (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012).

And, finally, question 6 — and this leads me to the point that I am trying to make: known by whom?

Obviously by those who had the power to designate, the power to name: “More than words”, since 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 of being “indigenous” — even if with very good intentions, like the UNESCO.

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?

But the most interesting definition of “indigenous” that I have found is:

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<sup>4</sup> Accessed at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous>.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed at <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/indigenous?q=indigenous>.

<sup>6</sup> Accessed at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/indigenous?s=t>.

The word *indigenous* comes from the Latin ‘indigena’ meaning ‘a native’ and was developed in mid 17th century English to carry the meaning it now holds (*Macmillan Dictionary Blog*)<sup>7</sup>

And:

- Indigenous first emerged as a way for Europeans to differentiate enslaved black people from the indigenous peoples of the Americas, being first used in its modern context in 1646. (Woodruff, 2004)

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 world (Santos, 1993, 2018) 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, the 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

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<sup>7</sup> Accessed at <https://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/indigenous>.

realm of philosophy and theology. [...] This [is] the radical denial of copresence [...] — they can in no way be considered true or false (Santos, 2007: 1-4).

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, of taking speech up in all its fullness, of taking it into its place alongside the things of nature — language as one of man's proudest acts: to be able 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 to as "wrestling with Form to liberate Form" (Duncan, 1985: 8). 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 to — if used poetically, I would dare to translate — have a radically emancipatory potency: 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. 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 and 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 possibility for the survival of the tribe, the only possibility for the survival of the community.

The UNESCO (2018) 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. And, for that, what is 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 means to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1958: 8).

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:

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 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.  
(Duncan, 1985: 5)

Let me give you an example of what this absurd means: recently, 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 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 phantom objectivity that that artificial construct — that language is — is displaying on the screen (Taussig, 2010). 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 onwards, the only bards of an extinct community — they became the keepers of certain forms of knowledge, of a world said and/or 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.

According to the UNESCO site (2018), there are:

- 7 thousand languages spoken worldwide
- 370 million indigenous people
- 90 countries with indigenous communities
- 5 thousand 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”? (Fortes, 2001)<sup>8</sup> — 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, after all.

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 language, 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 his poetry to something familiar or recognizable by any European and/or Western 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 one can do to 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 favorable 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

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.

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<sup>8</sup> 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 (see Fortes, 2001: 18-25).

Let me then conclude by inviting us all to *listen* to Cape Verdean poet Corsino Fortes (2011), to his words, and, "more than words", to the silences in his poetry — "silence(s) made of many doors":

**Letter from Bia d'Ideal**

(translated by Daniel Hahn and Sean O'Brien)

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

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*<sup>[9]</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> My emphasis.

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  
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

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