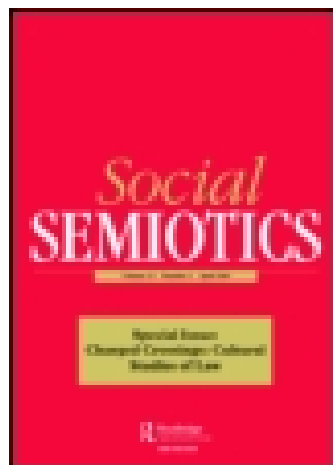


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Voices on Paper: Multimodal Texts and Indigenous Literacy in Brazil

LYNN MARIO T. MENEZES DE SOUZA

This paper focuses on the recent production of multimodal writing in an indigenous community in Brazil, resulting from the equally recent introduction of literacy. Seeing this form of writing as part of the process of intercultural semiosis and cultural translation, the paper discusses how concepts of local indigenous oral culture and received wisdom interact with the Western concept of writing as the 'record' or 'representation' of speech, bringing to writing the indigenous notion of cultural 'enactment' or 'performativity'. In an effort to overcome a view of alphabetic writing as semantically only propositional, mimetic and decontextualized, the Kashinawá community, by adding visual components to alphabetic texts, appear to transform writing into contextualized performative 'poiesis', which simultaneously inaugurates a complex process of semiosis inseparable and only comprehensible from their local cultural perspective.

Literacy theory has come a long way from the once-dominant perception of literacy as a code or a technology; recent theories of literacy as a plural ('literacies'), ideological and culture-bound notion are ever-more visible. It is almost commonplace nowadays to see literacy as an 'ecology of writing' (Barton 1994) where, instead of 'codes', one now speaks of 'practices' and 'events'. However, Barton (2001: 98) himself has recently recognized that the long-held idea of writing as 'speech written down' still persists in some camps. Against this, Barton re-asserts the need to see literacy as embracing more than the acts of reading and writing.

In this paper, my object of analysis is a phenomenon resulting directly from the recent introduction of literacy in an indigenous community in Brazil; more specifically, the Kashinawa¹ community of northwest Brazil, in the upper Amazonian region of Acre. Not unlike other Amazonian communities, the Kashinawa have been producing a profusion of visual texts that consistently accompany their written texts constituting what Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) have elsewhere referred to as 'multimodal'² texts.

Due to the recent systematic and regular introduction of literacy in this community, it is still unclear whether the production of these visual/verbal texts will result in a new form of cultural writing 'practice'. However, the profusion and consistent production of these multimodal texts seems to indicate that, rather than a transient, passing phenomenon, a new process of indigenous intercultural semiosis is occurring as a result of the now constant and regular contact established between

this former predominantly oral local community and the national Brazilian ‘literate’ community. As in other situations of contact between culturally dissimilar and politically unequal communities, the intercultural semiosis of Kashinawa multimodal writing is marked by disparities and conflicts of interpretation on both sides of the cultural divide. The most marked result (and indication) of these conflicts is visible in the transformation that these visual/verbal texts undergo in the publishing process. Here, where manuscripts are transformed into printed texts, the intricate semiotic relationship between the visual and the verbal, clearly observable in the handwritten/drawn manuscripts, is drastically transformed in the printed versions where the visual texts are separated from and randomly, if at all, connected to their verbal³ counterparts.

This paper is based on current research on indigenous multimodal writing since 1999, involving a hybrid methodology consisting variously of direct observation, interviews,⁴ analysis of manuscripts and printed versions of texts, and constant recourse to past and current ethnographic and ethnological studies of the Kashinawa and other Amazonian Amerindian communities, and cultures carried out by anthropologists and linguists. What is lacking in these existent studies is a specific focus on multimodal writing, as *writing*, and a specific focus on the process of intercultural, contact semiosis that this new form of writing indicates. It is in this research vacuum that I locate my current work, as an attempt to understand Kashinawa multimodal writing in the light of a process of cultural contact or cultural translation,⁵ where, presumably, the *voices* of an oral culture and all they transmit, are now registered on paper.

Kashinawa Visual Texts

In their manuscript form, Kashinawa visual texts consist of highly colored drawings accompanied by alphabetic (verbal) texts. These drawings are of two consistent types: abstract geometric line drawings that may be monochromatic or multicolored, called *kene*; and figurative drawings representing persons, objects and various elements of nature, generally organized in some sort of narrative order, called *dami*.

The abstract *kene* geometric graphics are highly codified and occur in pre-established patterns. These graphics, which now appear on paper as a result of the introduction of literacy, previously only appeared woven into textiles and inscribed on bodily tattoos (where they continue to appear even after writing). When they appear on paper, *kene* graphics seem to be in the process of becoming codified in this new written mode, and consistently appear in any one of or a combination of the following forms: as ‘frames’ occurring in one or two margins of a written text, as tattoos covering persons or living beings represented as characters of the *dami* drawings in a text, or as ‘icons’ or symbols appearing in discreet corners of the written texts (Figure 1). These varying formats of the *kene* graphics seem to appear only in writing. When woven into textiles or painted in tattoos, *kene* graphics normally cover the whole surface on which they appear.

Before the introduction of literacy, the *dami* figurative drawings did not appear in other cultural artifacts of the community, and at present only occur on paper. They

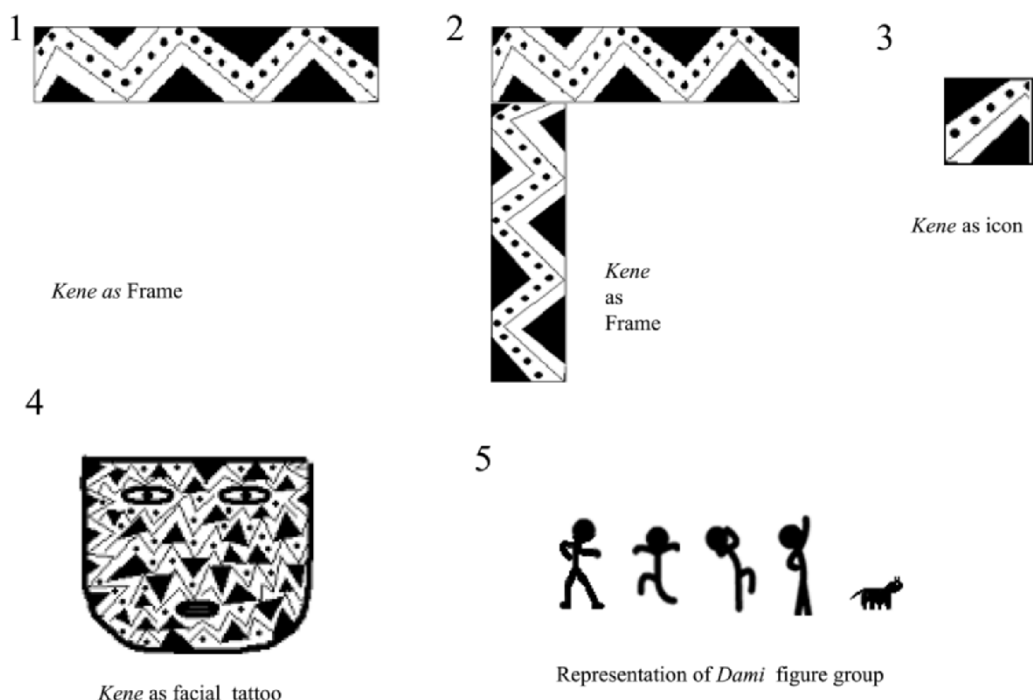


Figure 1.

may occur on their own or in varying combinations with the *kene* graphics and verbal texts. *Dami* drawings generally occur in groups, and are marked by a lack of any graphic indication of perspective or depth; to the outside reader, this makes them look like ‘primitive’ or children’s drawings. Besides the varying possible combinations between *kene* and *dami* drawings, these two graphic forms occur in written texts in varying combinations with verbal texts.

Kashinawa Semiosis and Performativity

Contrary to notions of texts (verbal or written) as static, isolated, self-contained objects, theorists of oral cultures such as Finnegan (1981) have already emphasized the importance of ‘performance’ in such cultures, where ‘texts’ are dynamically ‘performed’ making the line between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’, between ‘saying’ and ‘doing’, between ‘narrator’ and ‘audience’, tenuous and malleable, although highly codified. Elsewhere (Menezes de Souza 2002), I have shown how verbal production in oral cultures has suffered from what I called a *graphocentric* bias where their verbal productions, instead of being appreciated for their richness of characteristics typical of orality, tend to be seen negatively in terms of the characteristics of written culture that they obviously lack. From this graphocentric bias, orality is always seen as lacking and deficient. This perspective also (but not only) includes those who Barton (2001) refers to as defending writing as ‘speech written down’; however, by a curious tortuous logic, their view of ‘speech’, devoid of the myriad complex characteristics of orality, seems more like ‘writing spoken’; in other words, they tend to

pre-suppose a view of oral language based on the discursive characteristics of written language. As a result of this bias, those characteristics specific to spoken language remain invisible.

Kress (1997: xvi) calls for a change in our theories and perceptions of language, especially in order to, on one hand, account for language as 'productive, transformative action by a child or adult in relation to language or literacy' and, on the other hand, for language to go beyond its traditional conception of, as Barton also mentioned, 'speech written down'.

In the first case, Kress calls for a view of language as 'continuous dynamic change':

In such a theory, each instance of language interaction is seen as producing a change in language. Language is considered as being remade constantly by those who 'use' it: every time a word is used, it is changed; every time a grammatical structure is used that is changed. Such a theory [...] forces our attention away from seeing competent adherence to rules as sufficient and to focus on a concern with competent development and *enactment* of 'design'. (1997: xvii; emphasis added)

In the second case, Kress calls for a change of attention to meaning-making in the development of writing, in order to take into account how semiosis in writing involves multiple means of meaning-making involving 'different kinds of bodily engagement with the world' (1997: xvii), which he terms '*synaesthesia*': 'If we concede that speech and writing give rise to particular forms of thinking, then we should at least ask whether touch, taste, smell, feel, also give rise to their specific forms of thinking' (Kress 1997: xvii–xviii).

Taking this need for a dynamic, transformative view of language one step further, I propose to show that, rather than merely seeing language as a synaesthetic inter-semiotic 'performance', what Kress has in mind, in relation to Western cultures, has already been described by anthropologists in Amazonian cultures as the high degree of *performativity* prevalent in such cultures, where their various cultural practices may be seen as *enactments* of their beliefs and conventions. Such ethnologists and ethnographers (Turner 1988, Carneiro da Cunha 1999) have consistently emphasized the fact that, in these cultures, their social, political and cultural values readily inhere and are visible in their various material, ritualistic and organizational forms. In this sense, cultural concepts such as personhood, identity and semiosis, rather than abstract notions, are clearly and visibly *enacted* or *embodied* in various cultural artifacts, rituals and everyday practices. Viveiros de Castro (2002: 318–319), for example, in relation to Amerindian cultures, postulates the '*performative* rather than given character of the body [...] a way of thinking which posits bodies as the great differentiators yet at the same time states their transformability' (emphasis added).⁶

In his discussion of performativity in language, Austin (1962) defines the illocutionary performative speech act as one that, by 'saying' something, 'does' what it says on the occasion of its saying, based on previously established linguistic and cultural conventions. Such performative acts, according to Austin, are characteristic

of highly conventionalized ritualistic and ceremonial practices. As conventionalized behavior, ‘performances’⁷ of oral cultures, like Austin’s performative⁸ speech acts, may be said to *enact* culturally held beliefs already existent in the community at a level of ‘totality’. Although Austin does not define ‘totality’, he is often read as referring to the abstract conventions of an equally abstract, and perhaps idealized, ‘total speech community’. However, unlike this aspect of Austin’s notion of performatives, with Butler (1997) I propose to re-locate, recontextualize and re-signify the level of ‘totality’ of the speech community in which the conventions that authorize performatives are held, in order to permit them to be seen as *local* and not universal or general.

Also emphasizing the conventional aspect of semiosis, and especially the fact that semiotic conventions are *local*, Kress and van Leeuwen declare:

From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group arises from the values and beliefs of that group. As long as the message forms an apt expression of these beliefs, communication proceeds in an unremarkable, ‘felicitous’ fashion. (1996: 159–160)

In view of the discussion so far on performance and performativity and local knowledges, and taking writing as a cultural practice as part of a community’s cultural ‘ecology’ (Barton 1994), it should now be possible to envisage a culture’s particular means of meaning-making in the form and content of its writing practices. It is from this perspective that I proceed to read Kashinawa visual/verbal writing in manuscript form (before it is transformed into its radically different printed versions).

***Kene* Graphics and Complementary Duplicity**

Beginning first with Kashinawa *kene* graphics, what do they perform or enact? These graphics are most visible woven into textiles and painted in bodily tattoos. The abstract designs consist of monochromatic line patterns, normally in black or blue, set against a contrasting background, normally white or yellow, forming an intricate design of abstract image and counter-image woven into a whole piece of cloth or tattooed on a bodily part, such as the face. The *kene* design is not framed or bordered, and ends abruptly when and where its supporting surface terminates. To the viewer, the geometric lines present an abstract labyrinthine hypnotic image of continuous wavy lines organized in what at first glance looks like a regular rhythmic, pulsating pattern of abstract image and counter-image. Drawing the viewer into its visual labyrinth, the design then reveals, hidden in the apparent regularity of its graphic rhythm, points of irregularity, where new, unexpected abstract images suddenly appear, forming a break in the general visual rhythm of geometric regularity. For the Kashinawa, the geometric patterns are the patterns of the skin of the anaconda,⁹ which in their mythology relates to the arrival of culture and knowledge. In this myth,¹⁰ a Kashinawa man is seduced by a woman-anaconda who takes him

to her underwater world from where he later escapes, bringing back with him various forms of cultural knowledge including the *kene* designs.

Various Amazonian ethnologists (Guss 1989, Gow 1990, Keifenheim 1999, Lagrou 2001) have described the significance of abstract geometric drawings in Amazonian cultures as indicative of the role of *duality* in these cultures, appearing in terms of cultural oppositions such as masculine/feminine, visible/invisible, self/other; these oppositions signify *difference* and are indicative of how Amazonian cultures see difference not as external and exclusive, but as complementary and constitutive of personhood and identity. Although complementary, difference is not seen as the juxtaposition of two separate equal elements; rather, it is seen as being composed of two qualitatively different poles, equal only in their difference to each other.¹¹

The *kene* graphics enact this complementarity of difference in the constitution of identity by establishing a visual dialog between image and counter-image, regularity and irregularity, the expected and the unexpected, the visible and the invisible; most of all, this complementarity reaches a constitutive peak in its semiosis when the seer is seductively, hypnotically and visually drawn *into* the geometric pattern itself, thus confounding the very difference between subject and object, self and other. This dialogic complementarity of difference is itself not seen as an abstract, disembodied process, but as a performative contextualized *enactment*. Gow (1990) and Guss (1989) show how knowledge and memory for these cultures are highly contextualized and, far from being seen as abstract and distant, are considered to *constitute* and *embody* personhood. In other words, personhood may be said to be a performative enactment of knowledge. Lagrou (2001) shows how the *kene* graphics enact this importance of embodied and constitutive context in the dialog they establish between the pattern and the supporting surface (be it textile or bodily part). The duality enacted by the *kene* graphics emphasizes the positivity of and need for difference and alterity in these Amazonian cultures.

In her ethnographies on Kashinawa culture, Lagrou (1996, 1998) postulates that identity for this community constitutes a gradient between the extreme poles of the self and a radical Other. Considered within the context of prevailing duplicitous complementarity, for the Kashinawa, alterity as radical difference is seen as both desirable and threatening. The self has to be constituted by a complementary alterity, which, however, presents itself simultaneously as an implicit and mortal threat to the self. Thus, an insoluble yet inescapable paradox is established in this process of the constitution of Kashinawa identity; the only solution possible is to permit oneself to become Other. In view of the ideology of duplicitous complementarity, in this process of becoming Other, the Self is not only transformed by the Other, but also transforms the Other. The concept of being a Self, therefore, is paradoxically accompanied by the simultaneous and inexorable need for constantly becoming the Other.¹² As such, the dialogic duality of the *kene* graphics may now be seen to also *enact* or perform the very process of the construction of personhood and identity.

What happens when, with the introduction of literacy, *kene* graphics appear as

part of multimodal writing on paper? How can the multiple and complex process of semiosis implicit in and enacted synaesthetically by the *kene* graphics now be read?

As we have already seen, when part of writing on paper, *kene* appears as frames in one or two margins of the text, as tattoos covering figurative *dami* characters depicted in the text or as icons in discreet corners of the text. In interviews undertaken with the Kashinawa authors of multimodal texts as part of this research, it was unanimously apparent that they make no difference between drawing (*kene* and *dami*) and writing in terms of their *potential* capacity to carry and communicate content/information. Contradictorily, the informants significantly also expressed the opinion that, in spite of the importance of alphabetic writing, 'drawing' *in fact* carried more information. How does this help to understand the signification of *kene* graphics on paper?

Considering the importance of embodiment and performativity in Amazonian cultures, the introduction of literacy and (verbal/alphabetic) writing must now be contextualized. Besides the fact that the Brazilian constitution of 1988 finally and officially recognized the existence of indigenous languages and paved the way for the official Indigenous Education policies of 1998,¹³ several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had already begun to unofficially promote indigenous literacy campaigns and courses for indigenous teachers as an attempt to reduce and eradicate the various forms of economic, cultural and racial discrimination these communities were being subjected to since colonization. On their part, the indigenous communities seized the opportunity to acquire writing, to learn the national language (Portuguese) and to be able to resist this history of marginalization (Monte 1996, no date).

Recalling, first of all, the symbolic and metonymic connection between *kene* and the skin of the anaconda, and considering that the anaconda in turn symbolizes for the Kashinawa the myth of the origin of knowledge and culture, one may conclude that *kene* is symbolically connected to the acquisition of knowledge; as we have also seen earlier, the acquisition of knowledge as semiosis is inseparable from the constitution of personhood and identity. In fact, for the Kashinawa, the word *kene* signifies both the geometric line drawings *and* alphabetic writing. Yet, if lexically a semantic equivalence is given to both (alphabetic) writing and *kene*, the fact that *kene* insistently appears multimodally juxtaposed to alphabetic texts in the various forms we have mentioned may be seen to indicate that, in the context of local knowledge, the performative value attributed to *kene* may possibly not (yet) be attributed to alphabetic writing.

Here, it is worth recalling also the apparently confused responses of informants in the interviews, in which, in spite of the fact that writing and drawing are deemed potentially equivalent, drawing is still considered by them to be in fact capable of 'saying more'; reading these responses in the context of the performativity of local knowledge, there are grounds for concluding that, at present for the Kashinawa, given their recent acquisition of (alphabetic) writing, this form of writing may be seen to be (yet?) lacking the *performativity* of *kene*. In other words, alphabetic writing is possibly seen to have only a literal, *propositional* semantic value that needs to be complemented by the *performative* 'work'¹⁴ of *kene* in order for the alphabetic text to

do the duplicitous, complementary ‘work’ of not only communicating, portraying or containing knowledge, but also of *enacting* this knowledge. It is important here to recall that, as already mentioned, within the framework of complementary duplicity, knowledge cannot be decontextualized or seen as an object separated from a knower/subject. ‘New’ knowledge, as alterity or otherness (the ‘unknown’, the yet ‘invisible’), can only be acquired in a dialogic performative process, where the very enactment of the acquisition of knowledge transforms both the knower-to-be *and* the knowledge acquired.

This dialogic, duplicitous, complementary *performativity* leaves neither of the elements involved unscathed or unchanged; in this process of semiosis, alphabetic writing, as long as it is seen as a *new* element in Kashinawa culture, cannot become other than multimodal.

***Dami* Drawings and Perspectivism**

Whereas in Kashinawa *kene*, as we have already seen, signifies both ‘writing’ and the geometric graphic drawings, the word *dami* loosely means ‘change’ or ‘transformation’ and also refers to the figurative drawings that, with the introduction of literacy in the community, have begun to appear on paper. Here I focus only on those drawings that constitute multimodal texts in Kashinawa writing in varying combinations with *kene* graphics and alphabetic writing. Appearing in the shape of figures apparently representing humans, animals, plants and other elements of nature, *dami* rarely appear in the form of single isolated figures, and normally depict groups of figures organized in what appear to be narrative combinations, as if they were scenes from a narrative plot. The most noteworthy characteristic of the *dami* drawings is the fact that, to the Western eye, they appear ‘flat’, lacking in depth and perspective, and generating the facile impression that they are merely simple infantile drawings. Given the performative nature of Amazonian cultures, what cultural knowledge or values do the *dami* drawings enact? What is their significance in multimodal writing?

Although *dami* drawings are not formally codified as are the *kene* graphics, they embody two of the most basic aspects of Amazonian indigenous culture. The clues to an understanding of their significance is their literal meaning as ‘change’ or ‘transformation’, and the issue of perspective. The ethnologist Sullivan (1988) describes as the ‘primordium’ the recurring precept in Amazonian cultures of the beginning of time, when all beings of nature possessed an intrinsic equality and could metamorphose almost indiscriminately into each other. Viveiros de Castro (2002: 309) elaborates on this original state of intercommunicable undifferentiation between humans and animals in order to develop his theory of Amerindian indigenous ‘perspectivism’. Furthering Lévi-Strauss’ idea that the major theme of Amerindian mythology was the differentiation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, Castro shows that in these cultures, contrary to the Western evolutionary belief that with time the human condition arises and distances itself from an animal condition, Amerindian cultures believe that the original condition common to both animals and humans was not animality, but humanity; that is, both humans and animals, at the time of the ‘primordium’, were humans. After the great mythical separation,

some humans metamorphosed into animal form, whereas present-day humans retained their original form: so animals are ex-humans, but humans are not ex-animals. As such, the originary state at the 'primordium' was not nature, but culture; after the moment of mythical rupture and separation, when several once-human beings were transformed into various species of animals, nature (i.e. in the form of these recently metamorphosed humans-cum-animals) distanced itself from culture (the original human condition). As a result, the point of reference common to all beings of nature is humanity as a *condition* and not humanity as a *species*; both humans and animals share the originary *condition* of humanity, however—by occupying different bodies, they belong to different species.¹⁵ This is the basis of the indigenous philosophy of perspectivism, which does not see perspective as a fixed substantial location, but as a moveable transformative and relational process.¹⁶ Thus, instead of a subject–object ontological dialectic, all beings that share the original human condition can only assume the position of subject. According to Lagrou (2001: 113), the difference between one subject and another is the difference between the known subject, part of one's own social unity, and the unknown subject, considered to be anti-social, and hence a threat. This is the dialectic that prevails between the hunter and the hunted, the aggressor and the victim. For our purposes of understanding Kashinawa writing, what may one conclude from: (i) the cultural belief in an originary common state followed by a process of radical metamorphosis; and (ii) the belief in a lack of fixed perspective, where two equivalent (although not identical) beings conflict to occupy the position of the subject, and neither occupies the position of the object? How is this perspectivism enacted or performed in the *dami* drawings?

Whereas, as we have seen earlier, the *kene* graphics enact a dialogic *process* of duplicitous and complementary transformation, the *dami* drawings may be seen to enact the *products* of this process. However, given that this process is unceasing and continuous, and considering that, as we have seen, a perceptual conflict is established between two 'subjects' neither of which submits to the position of the 'object', it follows that as 'products' *dami* drawings can only be seen to be temporary; however, it is not yet clear what they are products *of*. Considering that these drawings are figurative and based on a minimal relation of similarity to whatever they are deemed to represent, for the Western eye it is easy to jump to the conclusion that they are essentially *mimetic* and may thus be *metaphors* or representations. Mimesis and metaphor, however, imply a relation of subject/object or original/substitute that would then require a fixed perspective that these drawings precisely do not have, in the context of indigenous perspectivism. Moreover, the Western concept of mimetic representation is based on the generation of a static final representation as *product*.

We have seen that in indigenous perspectivism this is not the case; there is no final product, in the same way that there is no original for which a substitute can be produced. Rather than a process of *mimesis*, *dami* drawings enact a process of dynamic and productive *poeisis*; thus, rather than being static objects that represent or refer to something else elsewhere, they *make present* their referents and set into play a dynamic relation between various levels of representations; they recuperate

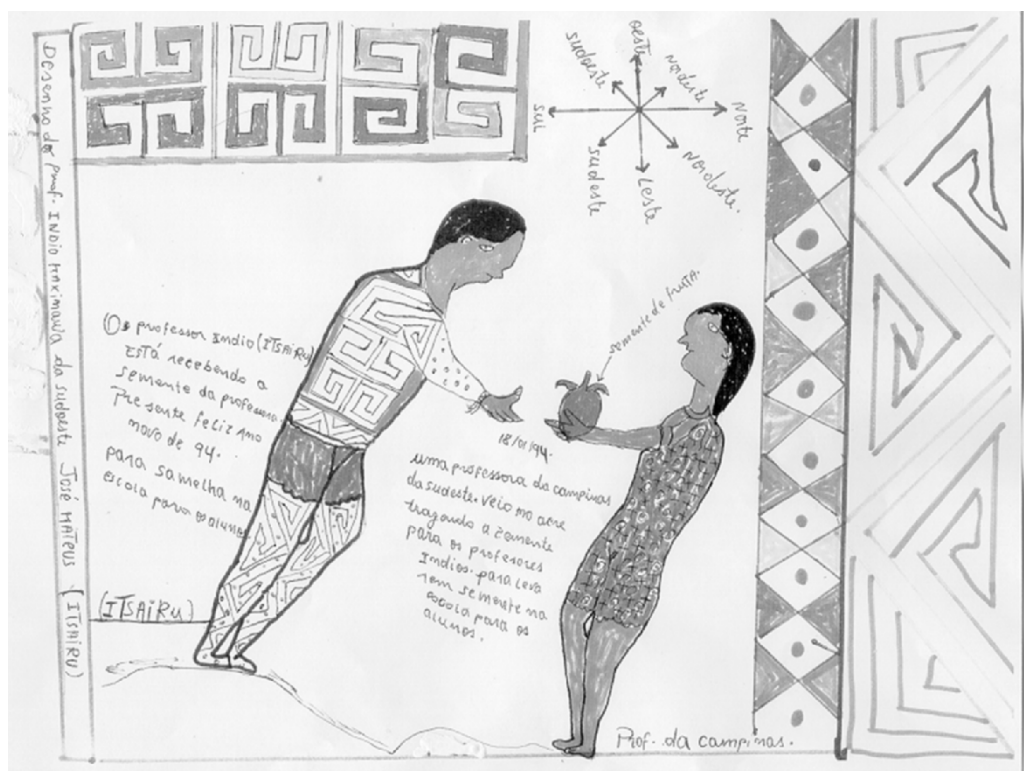


Figure 2.

the notion of the continuity of the web of life by which all forms of life are interconnected and metamorphosed as implied in indigenous perspectivism. For example, as we have analyzed in detail elsewhere (Menezes de Souza 2003), in the multimodal text illustrated in Figure 2 the *dami* figures simultaneously narrate a specific event illustrated in the text (a meeting and an exchange/acquisition) together with the anaconda originary myth; although this is not directly visually present in the text, it is recognizable to a Kashinawa reader familiar with the myth. The *dami* figures enact the multiple references of perspectivism, not merely reproducing an event, but re-enacting the event, reminding the reader that the figures temporarily make present the objects, persons or events represented. As an enactment or performative of perspectivism, *dami* figures may be said to carry not a denotative or propositional meaning (which would require a fixed perspective, and hence a pre-established meaning), but a connotational or performative significance.

In general, when produced by adults, the great majority of texts with *dami* drawings co-occur with *kene* graphics. The *kene* patterns, in their varying forms (as frames, tattoos or minimal icons) appear to legitimate or mark the *dami* drawings with greater informational or truth value. In the few cases when *dami* drawings appear alongside only alphabetic text, they appear to have an almost 'literal' or denotative meaning, functioning as mere illustrations of the verbal text. In these cases, the drawings do not make reference to other narratives or elements not

visually present in the text. Here they may be seen as mere borrowings from the external national culture and not enactments with any specific performative value. As such, the *kene* patterns seem to be the most significant by far of the three elements of multimodal Kashinawa texts—*kene*, *dami* and alphabetic text.

At the beginning of this article I used the term ‘contact semiosis’ to refer to the appearance of Kashinawa multimodal writing in the context of and as a result of external (NGOs, the Brazilian Ministry of Education) and internal (the expressed need from within the community to overcome exploitation and discrimination) attempts at mutual contact. Although this contact occurs within a single country, the radical differences in semiosis between the indigenous oral Amerindian culture and the national Brazilian written culture resemble what Bhabha (1990) defines as ‘cultural translation’. In this process of contact, new forms of semiosis or meaning-making are inaugurated and deny or transform the essentialism of a prior original culture on both sides. This process of contact semiosis, or cultural translation according to Bhabha, shows that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity; however, the key aspect of hybridity is not to develop a new culture that will appear as the syncretic or synthetic result of the contact between two plentiful and original cultures; the positive aspect of hybridity is that ‘it displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom’ (Bhabha 1990: 211).

In terms of the contact between the Kashinawa culture and the Brazilian national culture, whereas openness to difference, hybridity and change, as we have seen, is an essential part of Amerindian received wisdom, unfortunately the same does not apply to Western Eurocentric received wisdom prevalent in Brazil. This can be clearly seen in the phenomenon of Kashinawa multimodal writing, where this indigenous community has made an effort to acquire alphabetic writing and adapt and transform the very notion of writing as ‘speech written down’ to the synaesthetic performative notion of writing as *kene* and *dami*. In the process, it has allowed its own notion of *kene* to be transformed. On the contrary, for the prevailing Brazilian culture, these aspects of this other ‘writing’ continue to be invisible as can be seen from the transformations that Kashinawa multimodal writing is subjected to in the publishing process, where the principles of *kene* and *dami* are totally and consistently ignored and decontextualized, and where primary importance is given to the verbal alphabetic component of the text.

This decontextualization occurs as a result of, among other things, a conflict in standards of ‘coherence’ that Fairclough¹⁷ defined as an essential aspect of interpretation: ‘coherence is not a property of texts, but a property which interpreters impose upon texts, with different interpreters possibly generating different coherent readings of the text’ (1992: 133).

Finally, let us come back full circle to Barton’s (2001) comment that writing is not ‘speech written down’; in a similar vein, Derrida (1974: 144) had already pointed out that, in the Western tradition, speech was seen to represent thought, and writing was seen to represent speech. Following this logic through, Derrida concluded that writing, rather than representing *speech* (the prevalent concept of writing in the

West), in fact represents *thought*. Seeing writing therefore as a mere mediation, separated from and not anchored to either speech nor thought, Derrida develops his concept of writing as decontextualized ‘supplement’ with no identifiable origin. Mignolo (1996: 305) rightly disagrees with Derrida in this respect; claiming that, for Amerindian cultures such as the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas with their non-alphabetic (pictographic, ideographic, etc.) systems of pre-colonial writing, ‘new articulations of the complicities between speech and writing’ have to be possible.

If one seizes *tout court* Derrida’s concept of writing as representative of thought and not of speech, and considers that the *kene* graphics—both in woven textiles and in tattoos—enact or embody essential aspects or concepts of Kashinawa thought, then the *kene* patterns may indeed be considered as *writing* even before they are transferred to paper and transformed into multimodal writing. However, in spite of this, there is an essential difference with Derrida’s concept of writing; whereas Derrida sees Western writing as decontextualized and an abstract system of mediation, for Amerindian cultures, on the contrary, embodiment, enactment and the performative aspect of writing are highly significant; in other words, unlike Western writing for Derrida, Amerindian writing—both in its non-alphabetic and its multimodal forms—is localized and contextualized, and has to be read as such.

Thus, Kashinawa multimodal writing, far from being mere ‘voices on paper’ in the sense of ‘speech written down’, has developed an intricate multimodal form true to the values of its eminently oral culture, and hence becomes the complex synaesthetic performance/enactment of ‘voices on paper’, in the sense of attempting to transpose to paper the wealth and complexity of indigenous orality. Whether this phenomenon is a temporary *ad hoc* by-product of contact semiosis, or a permanent hybrid form of non-alphabetic writing, remains to be seen.

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Notes

1. The Kashinawa form a population of around 1200 on the Brazilian border with Peru. On the Peruvian side, they number more than 4000 (Aquino & Iglesias 1994).
2. ‘Multimodal’ may be loosely defined as texts in which the verbal and visual modes closely interact.
3. Given my use of the term ‘writing’ to refer to more than the representation of speech, I shall pursue in using ‘verbal’ (and not ‘written’) to contrast with ‘visual’.
4. My thanks to Tereza Maher for her help in recording the interviews.
5. Bhabha (1990) defines cultural translation as the result of the contact between two or more cultures, where both cultures exert influences on each other.
6. For a further elaboration, see my later discussion on indigenous perspectivism.
7. Butler (1994) distinguishes between ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ such that the former presumes a subject, whereas the latter contests the very notion of the subject. Butler here is speaking of Western written cultures and a liberal individualistic notion of personhood and the subject. In this study, my focus is on oral non-Western cultures, where the notion of personhood is social and collective. For my purposes, then, although my focus is on performativity, I believe it useful to connect performativity with the also collective and social connotation of ‘performance’ as occurs in oral cultures.
8. See Butler (1997) for a discussion of how Austin’s performativity tacitly carries with it the

concept of the 'sovereign (universal) subject' in its pre-suppositions of conventionality, as opposed to a contextually changing, *local* subject. For Butler, in Austin's terms, the speaker of a performative act runs the risk of being seen or seeing himself as the impersonal origin of the conventions that authorize and, hence, permit his utterance to be deemed performative. Butler seeks to show that, by construing performativity in terms of locally contextualized conventions, the path for ideological resistance and difference is opened.

9. See Lagrou (2001) for a discussion of how for the Kashinawa, 'images' or representations are not mere mimetic copies, but are also imbued with the life and energy of what they seem to represent; see the following discussion on *dami*. Thus, *kene*, rather than metaphorically 'representing' the (absent) anaconda in the Western sense, in fact metonymically *is* the anaconda.
10. See Camargo (1999).
11. Lévi-Strauss (1995) exemplifies this with the Amazonian concept of twins, where these are seen not as two different identical beings, but as two qualitatively different beings, in the sense that one is always born before and is hence older than the other.
12. See, for example, how the myth of the Kashinawa man being seduced by the anaconda enacts this process: he allowed himself to be seduced, transformed into an anaconda and taken to the anaconda underworld, only to acquire new knowledge and bring it back to his human community, which is then itself transformed by the knowledge thus obtained. A recurring trope in Kashinawa and Amazonian culture is the strategy of survival of the anaconda that constantly changes (skin) in order to remain the same.
13. The Brazilian Ministry of Education issued in 1998 a set of official curricular orientations for indigenous schools permitting the use of local knowledges, materials, pedagogies and schedules for indigenous schools to be established in indigenous communities with indigenous teachers called the 'Referencial Curricular Nacional para a Escola Indígena'.
14. Here, 'work' is seen in the performative sense of action or enactment.
15. Thus, for example, a jaguar sees another jaguar as a human, although they do not look human to humans, nor do humans look humans to jaguars; they may look like another species (e.g. a tapir) to a jaguar.
16. Castro was inspired by Deleuze's (1988: 27) notion of perspectivism: 'It does not express a dependency on a pre-defined subject; on the contrary, whatever accedes to the point of view will be subject'.
17. '[I]n order to make sense of texts, interpreters have to find ways of fitting the diverse elements of a text into a coherent, though not necessarily unitary, determinate or unambivalent whole. It is easy to see this as simply an achievement of interpreters, which implicitly places interpreters as discourse subjects above and outside intertextuality, as able to control discursive processes which are exterior to them. Such a view implies social and discursive subjects that mysteriously pre-exist social and discursive practices, and misses the contribution of those practices to the constitution of subjects' (Fairclough 1992: 133).

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