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Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation¹

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Tropical Americanism has proven to be one of the most dynamic and creative areas of contemporary anthropology, exerting a growing influence on the wider conceptual agenda. Yet despite this flourishing, and although the fundamental work of Lévi-Strauss—within which Amerindian thought is given pride of place—has already been in circulation for more than half a century, the radical originality of the contribution of the continent’s peoples to humanity’s intellectual heritage has yet to be fully absorbed by anthropology. More particularly, some of the implications of this contribution for anthropological theory itself are still waiting to be drawn. This is what I intend to begin to do here by suggesting some further thoughts on Amerindian perspectivism, a theme with which I have been occupied (or perhaps obsessed) over the last few years.²

TRANSLATION

The title of this paper is an allusion to a famous article by Fred Eggan (1954) entitled “Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison,” which made up part of the toolbox of the well-known Harvard–Central Brazil Project, of which I am one of the academic descendants. The double difference between the titles registers the general direction of my argument, which, truth be known, has little to do with Eggan’s. The substitution of “perspectival” for “social” indicates first of all that the “anthropology” I am referring to is a hybrid formation, the result of a certain recursive imbrication among Western anthropological discourses (our very own ethno-anthropology), which are rooted in our modern multiculturalist and uninaturalist ontology, and the anthropological image conveyed by Amerindian cosmopraxis in the form of a perspectivist theory of transpacific personhood, which is by contrast unicultural and multinatural.

Second, and more generally, this substitution expresses my conviction that contemporary anthropology is social (or, for that matter, cultural) only

in so far as the first question faced by the anthropologist is to work out what constitutes, both by extension and comprehension, the concept of the social (the cultural) for the people studied. Said differently, the question is how to configure the people as theoretical agent rather than as passive “subject.” As I argued in a recent paper (Viveiros de Castro 2002b:122), anthropology’s defining problem consists less in determining which social relations constitute its object, and much more in asking what its object constitutes as a social relation—what a social relation is in the terms of its object, or better still, in the terms that emerge from the relation (a social relation, naturally) between the “anthropologist” and the “native.”

Put concisely, doing anthropology means comparing anthropologies, nothing more—but nothing less. Comparison is not just our primary analytic tool. It is also our raw material and our ultimate grounding, because what we compare are always and necessarily, in one form or other, comparisons. If culture, as Marilyn Strathern wrote, “...consists in the way people draw analogies between different domains of their worlds” (1992:47), then every culture is a gigantic, multidimensional process of comparison. Following Roy Wagner, if anthropology “stud[ies] culture through culture,” then “whatever operations characterize our investigations must also be general properties of culture” (1981:35). In brief, the anthropologist and native are engaged in “directly comparable intellectual operations” (Herzfeld 2003:7), and such operations are above all else comparative. Intracultural relations, or internal comparisons (the Strathernian “analogies between domains”), and intercultural relations, or external comparisons (the Wagnerian “invention of culture”), are in strict ontological continuity.

But direct comparability does not necessarily signify immediate translatability, just as ontological continuity does not imply epistemological transparency. How can we restore the analogies traced by Amazonian peoples within the terms of our own analogies? What happens to our comparisons when we compare them with indigenous comparisons?

I propose the notion of “equivocation” as a means of reconceptualizing, with the help of Amerindian perspectivist anthropology, this emblematic procedure of our academic anthropology—comparison. I have in mind something distinct from Eggan’s comparison, which was comparison between different spatial or temporal instantiations of a given sociocultural form. Seen from the viewpoint of the “rules of anthropological method,” this type of comparison is just a regulative rule—and other forms of anthropological investigation exist. Rather, the comparison of which I am thinking is a constitutive rule of the discipline. It concerns the process involved in the translation of the “native’s” practical and discursive concepts

into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus. I am talking about the kind of comparison, more often than not implicit or automatic (and hence uncontrolled), which necessarily includes the anthropologist's discourse as one of its terms, and which starts to be processed from the very first moment of fieldwork, if not well before. Controlling *this* translative comparison between anthropologies is precisely what comprises the art of anthropology.

Today it is undoubtedly commonplace to say that cultural translation is our discipline's distinctive task. But the problem is knowing what precisely is, can, or should be a translation, and how to carry such an operation out. It is here that things start to become tricky, as Talal Asad demonstrated in a noteworthy article (1986). I adopt the radical position, which is I believe the same as Asad's, and that can be summarized as follows: in anthropology, comparison is in the service of translation and not the opposite. Anthropology compares *so as to translate*, and not to explain, justify, generalize, interpret, contextualize, reveal the unconscious, say what goes without saying, and so forth. I would add that to translate is always to betray, as the Italian saying goes. However, a good translation—and here I am paraphrasing Walter Benjamin (or rather Rudolf Pannwitz via Benjamin)³—is one that betrays the destination language, not the source language. A good translation is one that allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator's conceptual toolbox so that the *intentio* of the original language can be expressed within the new one.

I shall present a brief account (a translation) of the theory of translation present in Amerindian perspectivism in order to see whether we can succeed in modifying our own ideas about translation—and thus about anthropology—in such a way as to reconstitute the *intentio* of Amerindian anthropology in the language of our own. In doing so I shall make the claim that perspectivism projects an image of translation as a process of controlled equivocation—"controlled" in the sense that walking may be said to be a controlled way of falling. Indigenous perspectivism is a theory of the equivocation, that is, of the referential alterity between homonymic concepts. Equivocation appears here as the mode of communication par excellence between different perspectival positions—and therefore as both condition of possibility and limit of the anthropological enterprise.

PERSPECTIVISM

I use "perspectivism" as a label for a set of ideas and practices found throughout indigenous America and to which I shall refer, for simplicity's

sake, as though it were a cosmology. This cosmology imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities. The possession of a similar soul implies the possession of similar concepts, which determine that all subjects see things in the same way. In particular, individuals of the same species see each other (and each other only) as humans see themselves, that is, as beings endowed with human figure and habits, seeing their bodily and behavioral aspects in the form of human culture. What changes when passing from one species of subject to another is the “objective correlative,” the referent of these concepts: what jaguars see as “manioc beer” (the proper drink of people, jaguar-type or otherwise), humans see as “blood.” Where we see a muddy salt-lick on a river bank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house, and so on. Such difference of perspective—not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds—cannot derive from the soul, since the latter is the common original ground of being. Rather, such difference is located in the bodily differences between species, for the body and its affections (in Spinoza’s sense, the body’s capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies) is the site and instrument of ontological differentiation and referential disjunction.⁴

Hence, where our modern, anthropological multiculturalist ontology is founded on the mutual implication of the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures, the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity—or, in other words, one “culture,” multiple “natures.” In this sense, perspectivism is not relativism as we know it—a subjective or cultural relativism—but an objective or natural relativism—a multinaturalism. Cultural relativism imagines a diversity of subjective and partial representations (cultures) referring to an objective and universal nature, exterior to representation. Amerindians, on the other hand, propose a representative or phenomenological unity that is purely pronominal in kind applied to a real radical diversity. (Any species of subject perceives itself and its world in the same way we perceive ourselves and our world. “Culture” is what one sees of oneself when one says “I.”)

The problem for indigenous perspectivism is not therefore one of discovering the common referent (say, the planet Venus) to two different representations (say, “Morning Star” and “Evening Star”). On the contrary, it is one of making explicit the equivocation implied in imagining that when the jaguar says “manioc beer” he is referring to the same thing as us (i.e., a tasty, nutritious and heady brew). In other words, perspectivism supposes a constant epistemology and variable ontologies, the same representations and other objects, a single meaning and multiple referents.

Therefore, the aim of perspectivist translation—translation being one of shamanism’s principal tasks, as we know (Carneiro da Cunha 1998)—is not that of finding a “synonym” (a co-referential representation) in our human conceptual language for the representations that other species of subject use to speak about one and the same thing. Rather, the aim is to avoid losing sight of the difference concealed within equivocal “homonyms” between our language and that of other species, since we and they are never talking about the same things.

This idea may at first sound slightly counterintuitive, for when we start thinking about it, it seems to collapse into its opposite. Here is how Gerald Weiss, for instance, described the Campa world:

It is a world of relative semblances, where different kinds of beings see the same things differently; thus human eyes can normally see good spirits only in the form of lightning flashes or birds whereas they see themselves in their true human form, and similarly in the eyes of jaguars human beings look like peccaries to be hunted (1972:170).

Now, the manner in which Weiss “sees things” is not an error but is more precisely an equivocation. The fact that different kinds of beings see the same things differently is but a *consequence* of the fact that different kinds of beings see different things in the same way. The phantasm of the thing-in-itself haunts Weiss’s formulation, which actually expresses an inversion of the problem posed by perspectivism—a typically anthropological inversion.

Perspectivism includes a theory of its own description by anthropology—since it is an anthropology. Amerindian ontologies are inherently comparative: they presuppose a comparison between the ways different kinds of bodies “naturally” experience the world as an affectual multiplicity. They are, thus, a kind of inverted anthropology, for the latter proceeds by way of an explicit comparison between the ways different types of mentality “culturally” represent the world, seen as the unitary origin or virtual focus of its different conceptual versions. Hence, a culturalist (anthropological) account of perspectivism necessarily implies the negation or delegitimization of its object, its “retroprojection” (Latour 1996) as a primitive and fetishized kind of anthropological reasoning.

What I propose as an experimental program is the inversion of this inversion, which starts out from the following question: what would a perspectivist account of anthropological comparison look like? As I lack the space in this essay to reply in full with detailed examples of “controlled equivocation,” I will discuss just its general principles.

BODIES AND SOULS

One of the starting points for my first analysis of perspectivism, published in 1996, was an anecdote told by Lévi-Strauss in *Race et histoire*. It illustrates the pessimistic thesis that one of the intrinsic aspects of human nature is the denial of its own universality. A congenital and narcissistic avarice, preventing the attribution of the predicates of human nature to the species as a whole, appears to be part of these predicates. In sum, ethnocentrism, just like good sense (which is perhaps the sociological translation of ethnocentrism) is the best shared thing in the world. Lévi-Strauss illustrates the universality of this antiuniversalist attitude with an anecdote based on Oviedo's *History*, and which took place in Puerto Rico:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction (1973 [1952]:384).

The parable's lesson obeys a familiar ironic format, but is none the less striking. The favoring of one's own humanity at the cost of the humanity of another manifests a similarity with this scorned other. And since the Other of the Same (of the European) is revealed to be the same as the Other of the Other (of the Indian), the Same ends up revealing itself—unknowingly—to be exactly the same as the Other.

The anecdote was recounted by the author in *Tristes tropiques*. There it illustrates the cosmological shock produced in sixteenth-century Europe by the discovery of America. The moral of the tale continues to be that of the previous book, namely the mutual incomprehension between Indians and Spaniards, equally deaf to the humanity of their unheard-of others. But Lévi-Strauss introduces an asymmetry, observing tongue-in-cheek that, in their investigations into the humanity of the other, the Whites invoked the social sciences, while the Indians placed more trust in the natural sciences. The former came to the conclusion that the Indians were animals, while the latter were content to suspect that the Whites were gods. "In equal ignorance," concludes the author, the latter was an attitude more befitting of human beings (1955:81–83).

Therefore, despite sharing an equal ignorance about the Other, the Other of the Other was *not* exactly the same as the Other of the Same.—It was in pondering this difference that I began to formulate the hypothesis that indigenous perspectivism situated the crucial differences between the

diversity of subjects on the plane of the body and not the spirit. For the Europeans, the ontological diacritic is the soul (are Indians humans or animals?). For the Indians, it is the body (are Europeans humans or spirits?). The Europeans never doubted that the Indians had bodies. After all, animals have them too. In turn, the Indians never doubted that the Europeans had souls. Animals and spirits have them too. In sum, European ethnocentrism consisted in doubting whether other bodies have the same souls as they themselves (today we would call the soul “the mind,” and the sixteenth-century theological problem would now be the philosophical “problem of other minds”). Amerindian ethnocentrism, on the contrary, consisted in doubting whether other souls had the same bodies.

MISTAKING ANTHROPOLOGY

This anecdote from the Antilles casts some light on one of the core elements of the perspectivist “message”—the idea of difference being inscribed in bodies, and the idea of the body as a dispositional system of affectability (do Europeans putrefy?) rather than as a material morphology. It was only very recently, though, that it dawned on me that the anecdote was not simply “about” perspectivism, it was *itself* perspectivist, instantiating the same framework or structure manifest in the innumerable Amerindian myths thematizing interspecific perspectivism. Here I have in mind the type of myth where, for example, the human protagonist becomes lost deep in the forest and arrives at a strange village. There the inhabitants invite him to drink a refreshing gourd of “manioc beer,” which he accepts enthusiastically and, to his horrified surprise, his hosts place in front of him a gourd brimming with human blood. Both the anecdote and the myth turn on a type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and know this. (In the case of the anecdote, the “dialogue” takes place on the plane of Lévi-Strauss’s comparative reasoning on reciprocal ethnocentrism.) Just as jaguars and humans apply the same name to two very different things, both Europeans and Indians “were talking” about humanity, that is, they were questioning the applicability of this self-descriptive concept to the Other. However, what Europeans and Indians understood to be the concept’s defining criterion (its intension and consequently its extension) was radically different. In sum, both Lévi-Strauss’s anecdote and the myth turn on an equivocation.

If we think about it carefully, the Antilles anecdote is similar to countless others we can come across in the ethnographic literature, or in our own

recollections from fieldwork. In actual fact, I think this anecdote encapsulates the anthropological situation or event par excellence, expressing the quintessence of what our discipline is all about. It is possible to discern, for example, in the archi-famous episode of the death of Captain Cook, as analyzed by Marshall Sahlins (1985), a structural transformation of the cross experiments of Puerto Rico. We are presented with two versions of the archetypal anthropological motive, that is, an intercultural equivocality. Life, as always, imitates art—events mime myth, history rehearses structure.

I shall propose one or two more examples of equivocation below. But what I wish to make clear is that equivocation is not just one among other possible pathologies that threaten communication between the anthropologist and the “native”—such as linguistic incompetence, ignorance of context, lack of personal empathy, indiscretion, literalist ingenuity, commercialization of information, lies, manipulation, bad faith, forgetfulness, and sundry other deformations or shortcomings that may afflict anthropological discursivity at an empirical level. In contrast to these contingent pathologies, the equivocation is a properly transcendental category of anthropology, a constitutive dimension of the discipline’s project of cultural translation. It expresses a *de jure* structure, a figure immanent to anthropology.⁵ It is not merely a negative facticity, but a condition of possibility of anthropological discourse—that which justifies the existence of anthropology (*quid juris?* as in the Kantian question). To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there. It is not to unmake the equivocation (since this would be to suppose it never existed in the first place) but precisely the opposite is true. To translate is to emphasize or potentialize the equivocation, that is, to open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact, a space that the equivocation precisely concealed. The equivocation is not that which impedes the relation, but that which founds and impels it: a difference in perspective. To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocity—the essential similarity—between what the Other and We are saying.

Michael Herzfeld recently observed that “anthropology is about misunderstandings, including anthropologists’ own misunderstandings, because these are usually the outcome of the mutual incommensurability of different notions of common sense—our object of study” (2001:2). I agree, but I would simply insist on the point that, if anthropology exists (*de jure*), it is precisely (and only) because that which Herzfeld calls “common sense” is not common. I would also add that the incommensurability of the clashing “notions,” far from being an impediment to their comparability,

is precisely what enables and justifies it (as Michael Lambek argued [1998]). Since it is only worth comparing the incommensurable, comparing the commensurable is a task for accountants, not anthropologists. Finally I should add that I conceive the idea of “misunderstanding” in the specific sense of equivocality found in Amerindian perspectivist cosmology. An equivocation is not just a “failure to understand” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989), but a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same, and that they are not related to imaginary ways of “seeing the world” but to the real worlds that are being seen. In Amerindian cosmology, the real world of the different species depends on their points of view, since the “world in general” consists of the different species themselves. The real world is the abstract space of divergence between species as points of view. Because there are no points of view *onto* things, things and beings are the points of view *themselves* (as Deleuze would say, 1988:203). The question for Indians, therefore, is not one of knowing “how monkeys see the world” (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990), but what world is expressed through monkeys, of what world they *are* the point of view. I believe this is a lesson from which our own anthropology can learn.

Anthropology, then, is about misunderstandings. But as Roy Wagner insightfully said about his early relations with the Daribi: “their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them” (1981:20). The crucial point here is not the empirical fact that misunderstandings exist, but the transcendental fact that it was not the *same* misunderstanding.

The question is not discovering who is wrong, and still less who is deceiving whom. An equivocation is not an error, a mistake, or a deception. Instead, it is the very foundation of the relation that it implicates, and that is always a relation with an exteriority. An error or deception can only be determined as such from within a given language game, while an equivocation is what unfolds in the *interval* between different language games. Deceptions and errors suppose premises that are already constituted—and constituted as homogenous—while an equivocation not only supposes the heterogeneity of the premises at stake, it poses them as heterogenic and presupposes them as premises. An equivocation determines the premises rather than being determined by them. Consequently, equivocations do not belong to the world of dialectical contradiction, since their synthesis is disjunctive and infinite. An equivocation is indissoluble, or rather, recursive: taking it as an object determines another equivocation “higher up,” and so on ad infinitum.

The equivocation, in sum, is not a subjective failure, but a tool of objectification. It is not an error nor an illusion—we need not to imagine

objectification in the post-Enlightenment and moralizing language of reification or fetishization (today better known as “essentialization”). Instead, the equivocation is the limiting condition of every social relation, a condition that itself becomes superobjectified in the extreme case of so-called interethnic or intercultural relations, where the language games diverge maximally. It goes without saying, this divergence includes the relation between anthropological discourse and native discourse. Thus, the anthropological concept of culture, for example, as Wagner argued, is the equivocation that emerges as an attempt to solve intercultural equivocality, and it is equivocal in so far as it follows, among other things, from the “paradox created by imagining a culture for people who do not imagine it for themselves” (1981:27). Accordingly, even when misunderstandings are transformed into understandings—like when the anthropologist transforms his initial bewilderment at the natives’ ways into “their culture,” or when the natives understand that what the Whites called, say, “gifts” were in reality “commodities”—even here such understandings persist in being not the same. The Other of the Others is always other. If the equivocation is not an error, an illusion or a lie, but the very form of the relational positivity of difference, its opposite is not the truth, but the *univocal*, as the claim to the existence of a unique and transcendent meaning. The error or illusion par excellence consists, precisely, in imagining that the univocal exists beneath the equivocal, and that the anthropologist is its ventriloquist.

BEING OUT THERE

An equivocation is not an error—the Spanish theologians, the Indians of Puerto Rico, the Hawaiian warriors, and the British sailors could not have been all (and entirely) wrong. I now wish to present another example of an equivocation, this time taken from an anthropological analysis. This example has been extracted from a recent Americanist monograph of the highest quality—I wish strongly to emphasize this—written by a colleague whom I admire greatly. Consider, then, this metacommentary by Greg Urban in his fine book *Metaphysical Community*, on Shokleng community-making discourse. Explaining discourse’s sociogenetic powers, Urban observes that:

Unlike the Serra Geral mountain range or jaguars or araucaria pines, the organization of society is not a thing that is out there, waiting to be understood. The organization must be created, and it is something elusive, intangible that does the creating. It is culture—here understood as circulating discourse (1996:65).

The author is defending a moderate constructionist position. Society, qua Shokleng social organization with its groups and emblems, is not something *given*, as traditional anthropologists used to think. Rather, it is something *created* through discourse. But discourse's power has limits: geographical features and biological essences are out there. They are, so to speak, bought ready-made, not made at home through circulating discourse. It must be admitted that there is nothing in the least bit shocking about Urban's commentary. Indeed, it seems eminently reasonable, and canonically anthropological. Moreover, it also accords neatly with what some equally reasonable philosophers look to teach us about the structure of reality. Take the doctrine of John Searle (1995), for example, which argues that two and only two types of facts exist: "brute facts," such as hills, rain and animals, and "institutional facts," such as money, iceboxes or marriage. The latter are made or constructed (performed) facts, since their sufficient reason coincides entirely with their meaning. The former, however, are given facts, since their existence is independent of the values attributed to them. This may be understood in a couple of words: nature and culture.

However, what do the Shokleng have to say about the matter? At the end of reading *Metaphysical Community*, the reader cannot but feel a certain unease in noting that Urban's splitting of the world—into a given realm of jaguars and pine trees, and a constructed world of groups and emblems—is not the split made by the Shokleng. Actually, it is almost exactly the inverse. The indigenous myths magnificently analyzed by Urban tell, among other things, that the original Shokleng, after sculpting the future jaguars and tapirs in araucaria wood, gave these animals their characteristic pelts by covering them with the diacritical marks pertaining to the clanic-ceremonial groups: spots for the jaguar, stripes for the tapir (1996:156–58). In other words, it is social organization that was "out there," and the jaguars and tapirs that were created or performed by it. The institutional fact created the brute fact. Unless, of course, the brute fact is the clanic division of society, and the institutional fact is the jaguars of the forest. For the Shokleng, in fact, culture is the given and nature is the constructed. For them, if the cat is on the mat, or rather, if the jaguar is in the jungle, it is because someone put it there.

In sum, we are faced with an equivocation. The discordant distribution of the given and the constructed, which inexorably separates Shokleng discourse on the real from anthropological discourse on Shokleng discourse, is never explicitly recognized as such by Urban. The solution that he implicitly offers for this chiasma is anthropology's classical solution. It consists of a highly characteristic operation of translation, which involves the metaphysical demotion of the indigenous distribution of the world to

the condition of metaphor: “Creation of the animal world is a metaphor for the creation of community” (Urban 1996:158). Where would we be without this statutory distinction between the literal and the metaphoric, which strategically blocks any direct confrontation between the discourses of anthropologist and native, thereby avoiding any major unpleasantness? Urban deems that the creation of community is literal, and that of jaguars, metaphoric. Or rather, that the first is literally metaphoric and the second metaphorically literal. The creation of community is literal, but the community thereby created is metaphoric (not “something out there”). Jaguars, they will be pleased to know, are literal, but their creation by the community is of course metaphoric.

We do not know whether the Shokleng concur with the anthropologist in considering the creation of jaguars and tapirs as a metaphor for the creation of the community. We could hazard a guess that probably they do not. On the other hand, Urban deems that the Shokleng do concur with him about the metaphorical nature of the community created by themselves, or better (and literally), by their discourse. Unlike other anthropologists or (other) peoples encumbered by a more essentialist mentality, the Shokleng are aware, thinks Urban, that their division into (nominally but not really) exogamic groups is not a brute fact. Rather, it is a metadiscursive representation of the community, which merely deploys the idiom of affinity and interfamily alliance in a “playful” way (1996:168). Thus, the anthropologist agrees with the Shokleng construction of the community as constructed, but disagrees with their positing of jaguars as constructed.

Later in his work, Urban interprets indigenous ceremonies as a way of representing the community in terms of relations within the family. The family is described in its turn (though we do not know whether by the anthropologist or by the natives) as an elementary unit founded on the “psychologically primitive” relations between the sexes and generations (Urban 1996:188–193). Society, metaphorized into its emblematic divisions and its collective rituals, is therefore imagined either as the result of an alliance between families, or, at a deeper (“primitive”) level, as a nuclear family. But the family does not seem to be, in Urban’s eyes at least, a metaphor *of* anything else—it is literal. It is a given that usefully serves as a metaphor *for* less literal things. The family is a naturally appropriate image, due to its cognitive salience and affective pregnancy (1996:171, 192–93). It is thus more real than the community. Society is naturally metaphoric, the family is socially literal. The nuclear family, the concrete bonds of conjugality and filiation, are a fact, not a fabrication. Kinship—not the metaphoric and intergroup kind of the community, but the literal and interindividual kind of the family—is something just as out there as

the animals and plants. Kinship is something without whose help, furthermore, discourse would be unable to construct the community. Indeed, it may even be out there for the same reasons as the animals and plants—by being, that is, a “natural” phenomenon.

Urban claims that anthropologists, in general, “have been the dupes” of peoples who may have taken their own metadiscourse on social organization “too seriously,” and who thus proved to be overliteralists, that is, *horresco referens*, essentialists (1996:137, 168–169). It may be that anthropology really has adopted a literalist attitude vis-à-vis the essence of “society.” But in counterpart, in terms of indigenous discourse on “nature” at least, anthropology has never been duped by the native or, above all, about the native. The so-called symbolist interpretation (Skorupski 1976) of primitive metaphysics has been in discursive circulation ever since Durkheim. It is this same interpretation that Urban applies to Shokleng discourse on jaguars—the literality of which he rejects—but rejects in favor of a completely literalist interpretation of the Western discourse on “things out there.” In other words, if the Shokleng concur (for the sake of hypothesis) with Urban’s anti-Durkheimian ontology of society, Urban concurs with Durkheim about the ontology of nature. What he is advocating is simply the extension of the symbolist attitude to the case of discourses about society, which thereby ceases to be the referential substrate of crypto-metaphoric propositions about nature (as it was in Durkheim). Now society too is metaphoric. The impression left behind is that discursive constructionism has to reify discourse—and, to all appearances, the family—in order to be able to de-reify society.

Was Urban wrong—was he making a false claim—in declaring that mountains and natural species are out there, while society is a cultural product? I do not believe so. But I do not think he was right either. As far as any anthropological point is at stake here, the interest of his declaration lies in the fact that it counterinvents the equivocation it enables, and that counterinvention gives it its objectifying power. Urban’s professed faith in the ontological self-subsistence of mountains and animals and on the institutional demiurgy of discourse is, in the final analysis, indispensable *for us* to be able properly to evaluate the enormity of the gap separating indigenous and anthropological ontologies.

I believe that I can indeed speak of an error or mistake on Urban’s part, since I am situated within the same language game as him—anthropology. I can therefore legitimately say (though I certainly may be wrong) that Urban was perpetrating an *anthropological* error by failing to take into account the equivocation within which he was implicated. The discordant distribution of the given and constructed parts between Urban and the

Shokleng is not an anodyne choice, a mere swapping of signals leaving the terms of the problem untouched. There is “all the difference in the world” (Wagner 1981:51) between a world where the primordial is experienced as naked transcendence, pure antianthropocentric alterity (the *non*-constructed, the *non*-instituted, that which is exterior to custom and discourse) and a world of immanent humanity, where the primordial takes on human form (which does not make it necessarily tranquilizing; for there where everything is human, the human is something else entirely). Describing this world as though it were an illusory version of our own, unifying the two via a reduction of one to the conventions of the other, is to imagine an overly simple form of relation between them. This explanatory ease ends up producing all sorts of uneasy complications, since this desire for ontological monism usually pays with an inflationary emission of epistemological dualisms—emic and etic, metaphoric and literal, conscious and unconscious, representation and reality, illusion and truth, et cetera.

“Perspective is the wrong metaphor,” fulminates Stephen Tyler in his normative manifesto for postmodern ethnography (1986:137). The equivocation that articulates Shokleng discourse with the discourse of their anthropologist leads me to conclude, to the contrary, that metaphor is perhaps the wrong perspective. This is certainly the case when anthropology finds itself face-to-face with a cosmology that is itself literally perspectivist.

NOT ALL MEN

I conclude by narrating a small translational equivoque in which I became involved a few years back. Milton Nascimento, the celebrated Brazilian musician, had made a journey to Amazonia, guided by some friends of mine who work for an environmentalist NGO (Non Governmental Organization). One of the high points of the trip had been a two-week stay among the Cashinahua of the Jordão river. Milton was overwhelmed by the warm welcome received from the Indians. Back on the Brazilian coast, he decided to use an indigenous word as a title for the album he was recording. The word chosen was *txai*, which the Cashinahua had used abundantly in addressing Milton and the other members of the expedition.

When the album *Txai* was due to be released, one of my friends from the NGO asked me to write a sleeve note. He wanted me to explain to Milton’s fans what the title meant, and to say something about the sense of fraternal solidarity expressed by the term *txai* and its meaning “brother,” and so on.

I replied that it was impossible to write the note in these terms, since *txai* may mean just about everything except, precisely, “brother.” I explained that *txai* is a term used by a man to address certain kinsfolk, for example, his cross-cousins, his mother’s father, his daughter’s children, and, in general, following the Cashinahua system of “prescriptive alliance,” any man whose sister ego treats as an equivalent to his wife, and vice versa (Kensinger 1995:157–74). In sum, *txai* means something akin to “brother-in-law.” It refers to a man’s real or possible brothers-in-law, and, when used as a friendly vocative to speak to non-Cashinahua outsiders, the implication is that the latter are kinds of affines. Moreover, I explained that one does not need to be a friend to be *txai*. It suffices to be an outsider, or even—and even better—an enemy. Thus, the Inca in Cashinahua mythology are at once monstrous cannibals and archetypical *txai* with whom, we should note in passing, one should not or indeed cannot marry (McCallum 1991).

But none of this would work, complained my friend. Milton thinks that *txai* means “brother,” and besides it would be fairly ridiculous to give the record a title whose translation is “*Brother-in-law*,” would it not? Perhaps, I conceded. But do not expect me to skip over the fact that *txai* signifies “other” or affine. The end result of the conversation was that the album continued to be called *Txai*, and the sleeve note ended up being written by someone else.

Note that the problem with this misunderstanding about *txai* does not lie in the fact that Milton Nascimento and my friend were *wrong* concerning the sense of the Cashinahua word. On the contrary, the problem is they were *right*—in a certain sense. In other words, they were “equivocated.” The Cashinahua, like so many other indigenous peoples of Amazonia, use terms whose most direct translations are “brother-in-law” or “cross cousin” in various contexts in which Brazilians, and other peoples from the Euro-Christian tradition, would really expect something like “brother.” In this sense, Milton was right. Had I remembered, I would have reminded my interlocutor that the equivocation had already been anticipated by an ethnologist of the Cashinahua. Talking about the difference between the social philosophy of this people and that held by the surrounding Whites, Barbara Keifenheim concludes: “The message ‘all men are brothers’ encountered a world where the most noble expression of human relations is the relation between brothers-in-law...” (1992:91). Precisely, but it is for this very reason that “brother” is not an adequate translation for *txai*. If there exists anyone with whom a Cashinahua man would be reluctant to call “*txai*,” it is his own brother. *Txai* means “affine,” not “consanguine,” even when used for purposes similar to our own, when we address a stranger as “brother.” While the purposes may be similar, the premises are decidedly

not so.

My translational mishap will undoubtedly sound completely banal to the ears of Americanists who have been interested for a long time in the innumerable symbolic resonances of the idiom of affinity in Amazonia. The interest of this anecdote in the present context, however, is that it seems to me to express, in the actual difference between the idioms of “brother” and “brother-in-law,” two inverse modes of conceiving the principle of translative comparison: the multiculturalist mode of anthropology and the multinaturalist mode of perspectivism.

The powerful Western metaphors of brotherhood privilege certain (not all) logical properties of this relation. What are siblings, in our culture? They are individuals identically related to a third term, their genitors or their functional analogs. The relation between two siblings derives from their equivalent relation to an origin that encompasses them, and whose identity identifies them. This common identity means that siblings occupy the same point of view onto an exterior world. Deriving their similitude from a similar relation to a same origin, siblings will have “parallel” relations (to use an anthropological image) to everything else. Thus, people who are unrelated, when conceived to be related in a generic sense, are so in terms of a common humanity that makes all of us kin, that is, siblings, or at least, to continue to use the previous image, parallel cousins, classificatory brothers: children of Adam, of the Church, of the Nation, of the Genome, or of any other figure of transcendence. All men are brothers to some extent, since brotherhood is in itself the general form of the relation. Two partners in any relation are defined as connected in so far as they can be conceived to *have something in common*, that is, as being in the *same* relation to a third term. To relate is to assimilate, to unify, and to identify.

The Amazonian model of the relation could not be more different to this. “Different” is the apposite word, since Amazonian ontologies postulate difference rather than identity as the principle of relationality. It is precisely the difference between the two models that grounds the relation I am attempting to establish between them (and here we are already using the Amerindian mode of comparing and translating).

The common word for the relation, in Amazonian worlds, is the term translated by “brother-in-law” or “cross cousin.” This is the term we call people we do not know what to call, those with whom we wish to establish a generic relation. In sum, “cousin/brother-in-law” is the term that creates a relation where none existed. It is the form through which the unknown is made known.

What are the logical properties of the connection of affinity highlighted in these indigenous usages? As a general model of relationship, the brother-

in-law connection appears as a cross connection with a mediating term, which is seen in diametrically opposite ways by the two poles of the relation: my sister is your wife and/or vice versa. Here, the parties involved find themselves united by that which divides them, linked by that which separates them (Strathern 1992:99–100). My relation with my brother-in-law is based on my being in *another* kind of relation to his relation with my sister or my wife. The Amerindian relation is a difference of perspective. While we tend to conceive the action of relating as a discarding of differences in favor of similarities, indigenous thought sees the process from another angle: the opposite of difference is not identity but *indifference*. Hence, establishing a relation—like that of the Cashinahua with Milton Nascimento—is to differentiate indifference, to insert a difference where indifference was presumed. No wonder, then, that animals are so often conceived as affinally related to humans in Amazonia. Blood is to humans as manioc beer is to jaguars, in exactly the same way as a sister to me is a wife to my brother-in-law. The many Amerindian myths featuring interspecific marriages and discussing the difficult relationships between the in-marrying affine and his/her allospecific parents-in-law, simply compound the two analogies into a single one.

The implications of these two models of social relationship for an anthropological theory of translation are evident. Such implications are not metaphorical. If anything, the opposite happens to be the case, since relations of meaning are social relations. If the anthropologist starts out from the metaprinciple that “all men are brothers,” he (or she) is presupposing that his (or her) discourse and that of the native manifest a relation of an ultimately brotherly nature. What founds the relation of meaning between the two discourses—and therefore justifies the operation of translation—is their *common referent*, of which both present parallel visions. Here, the idea of an external nature that is logically and chronologically prior to the cultures that partially represent it acts out the role of the parent who founds the relation between two siblings. We could imagine here a hierarchical interpretation of this brotherly parallelism, with the anthropologist assuming the role of literal and rational elder brother and the native his metaphoric and symbolic younger brother. Or, on the contrary, we could adopt a radically egalitarian interpretation, with the two protagonists seen as twins, and so forth. Whatever the case, in this model translation is only possible because the discourses are composed of synonyms. They express the same parental reference to some (indeed any) kind of transcendence with the status of nature (*physis*, *socius*, *gene*, *cognition*, *discourse*, *et cetera*). Here, to translate is to isolate what the discourses share in common, something that is only “in them” because it is

(and was already before them) “out there.” The differences between the discourses amount to no more than the *residue* that precludes a perfect translation, that is, an absolute identification overlap between them. To translate is to presume redundancy.

However, if all men are brothers-in-law rather than brothers—that is, if the image of the social connection is not that of sharing something in common (a “something in common” acting as foundation), but, on the contrary, is that of the difference between the terms of the relation, or better, of the difference between the differences that constitute the terms of the relation—then a relation can only exist between what differs and in so far as it differs. In this case, translation becomes an operation of differentiation—a production of difference—that connects the two discourses to the precise extent to which they are *not* saying the same thing, in so far as they point to discordant exteriorities beyond the equivocal homonyms between them. Contrary to Derrida, I believe the *hors-texte* perfectly well exists, *de facto* and *de jure*—but contrary to the positivists, I think each text has its own *hors-texte*. In this case, cultural translation is not a process of *induction* (finding the common points in detriment to the differences), much less a process of *deduction* (applying a priori a principle of natural unification to cultural diversity in order to determine or decree its meaning). Rather, it is a process of the type that the philosopher Gilbert Simondon called *transduction*:

Transduction functions as the inversion of the negative into a positive: it is precisely that which determines the non-identity between the terms, that which makes them disparate (in the sense held by this term in the theory of vision) which is integrated with the system of resolution and becomes the condition of signification; transduction is characterized by the fact that the outcome of this operation is a concrete fabric including all the initial terms ... (1995:32).

In this model of translation, which I believe converges with that present in Amerindian perspectivism, difference is therefore a condition of signification and not a hindrance. The identity between the “beer” of the jaguar and the “beer” of humans is posed only the better to see the difference between jaguars and humans. As in stereoscopic vision, it is necessary that the two eyes not see the *same* given thing in order for *another* thing (the real thing in the field of vision) to be able to be *seen*, that is, constructed or counterinvented. In this case, to translate is to presume a difference. The difference, for example, between the two modes of translation I have presented to you here. But perhaps this is an equivocation.

NOTES

1. This essay was presented as the keynote address at the meetings of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), held at Florida International University, Miami, January 17–18, 2004.
2. See Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2002a.
3. Pannwitz in Benjamin in Asad 1986:157.
4. Accordingly, Amazonian myths deal mostly with the causes and consequences of the species-specific embodiment of different precosmological subjects, all of them conceived as originally similar to “spirits,” purely intensive beings in which human and nonhuman aspects are indiscernibly mixed.
5. This idea is inspired by a beautiful page of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (1991:53–54).

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