

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

The Writing Lesson: Imaginary Inscriptions in Cultural Encounters

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6v20n0qw>

Journal

Critical Horizons, 4(1)

ISSN

1440-9917

Author

Schwab, Gabriele

Publication Date

2003-02-19

DOI

10.1163/156851603765200212

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Gabriele Schwab

The Writing Lesson: Imaginary Inscriptions in Cultural Encounters

ABSTRACT

This article takes a moment of intercultural exchange, first reported as "The Writing Lesson" by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* and later explored by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, as the occasion for further reflection on the role played by the aesthetic in what it terms intercultural transference. Transference occurs whenever unconscious desires, fantasies or patterns of being and relating are enacted in an interpersonal or intercultural encounter, including the indirect encounters between literary or artistic objects and their recipients. It emerges as a largely unconscious operation designed to bridge, close, fill or deny the inevitable gaps in knowing another person or another culture, and to manage the affects such gaps bring forth. Intercultural transference provides a framework to read "The Writing Lesson" differently and suggests a theoretical model able to account for the complex performances of intercultural transference that enter any exchange or translation between cultures.

KEYWORDS: Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, writing lesson, intercultural transference, aesthetic, mimicry, cultural unconscious

What else, indeed, have I learned from the masters who taught me, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have visited and even from that science which is the pride of the West, apart from a few scraps of wisdom which, when laid end to end, coincide with the meditation of the Sage at the foot of the tree?¹

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss includes a chapter entitled “The Writing Lesson” in which he reflects upon the emergence of writing in the hitherto oral culture of the Nambikwara, an Indian tribe in the Amazon rainforest. This piece has become a cornerstone of Derrida’s theory of writing and his arguments about epistemological, linguistic and metaphysical phonologism and logocentrism. In Part II of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida dedicates a whole chapter to a scrupulous reading of “The Writing Lesson” in which he targets Lévi-Strauss’ libertarian ideology of ethnocentric assimilation/exclusion. In particular, he faults him on the grounds of “an ethnocentrism *thinking itself* as anti-ethnocentrism, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating progressivism.”² In this context, Derrida also addresses the problem of the aesthetic. Lévi-Strauss had drawn attention to the fact that the Nambikwara called the act of writing *iekariukedjutu*, a word that literally translates as ‘drawing lines’. He concludes from this choice of word that writing, for the Nambikwara, had primarily an aesthetic signification. Derrida, in response, criticises Lévi-Strauss for presuming “that one can isolate aesthetic value”³ and, more importantly, for implying that in writing aesthetic value is extrinsic.

It is precisely the question of the aesthetic that interests me here. While I fully agree with Derrida’s insistence on seeing the aesthetic as an intrinsic value of writing that cannot be isolated, I would like to give the debate a different spin by exploring the role the aesthetic plays as an instance of intercultural transference. I use transference in the psychoanalytic sense of an unconscious displacement of affects or ideas. Transference occurs whenever unconscious desires, fantasies or patterns of being and relating are enacted in an interpersonal or intercultural encounter, including the indirect encounters between literary or artistic objects and their recipients. It emerges as a largely unconscious operation designed to bridge, close, fill or deny the inevitable gaps in knowing another person or another culture, and to manage the affects such

gaps bring forth. Transference therefore relies on imaginary constructions that reduce or transform otherness by giving it a familiar shape. Such constructions may range from highly creative and empathic apprehensions of the other to projective identification, and to foreclosure or paranoid rejection of difference. The imaginary fashioning of others, including cultural others, according to one's own frame of reference and organisation of affect may thus reduce anxieties that emerge in the face of otherness more generally. But often such imaginary operations entail projections of fear, hostile impulses or even illicit desires and come therefore at the high price of distortion and misrecognition, not only of the other, but also of oneself and one's own role in the encounter.

In intercultural encounters more specifically, transference is stimulated by the mutual unfamiliarity with the other's cultural codes and rules of communicative behaviour as well as the other's culture of emotions. Transference is, in fact, the very process that grounds what we have come to call the 'cultural imaginary' or the 'cultural unconscious'. The gaps in cultural competence and knowledge and the indeterminacy of performative interactions function analogously to what Freud envisioned as the 'empty screen' in the psychoanalytic situation that facilitates projection. We know, of course, that neither in interpersonal nor in intercultural encounters will we ever find a truly 'empty screen'. We rather encounter a fuzzy screen replete with gaps and hieroglyphic encodings of unfamiliar signs. Strangers to each other, the protagonists try to read the *hieroglyphs*, each according to their own cultural codes in an attempt to fill those gaps with projections based on their own personal and cultural knowledge. The ensuing projective dynamic can be understood as a transference both because it activates interiorised patterns of cultural contact that have become habitual or unconscious and because it inevitably entails an imaginary element. The role of the imaginary is, of course, highly ambivalent in that it may facilitate access to the other or foreclose it by ignoring, denying or resisting difference. There is, of course, also a conscious or unconscious struggle for power at work that concerns the question of which culture will ultimately prevail in providing the framework and values of the interaction.

As the "Writing Lesson" illustrates, fieldwork situations are intensely cathected by the psychic energies of both the anthropologist and the indigenous

people and therefore constitute hotbeds of intercultural transference. Let me briefly recall what Lévi-Strauss highlights as the 'extraordinary incident' that turned into the writing lesson. The scenes that immediately precede and follow the *writing lesson* are, in fact, a stunning, highly self-ironical travesty in which the anthropologist exposes himself as a *culturally* illiterate dupe among the *alphabetically* illiterate indigenous tribe. Lévi-Strauss' hilarious report on his expedition with his Utiarity friends into the rainforest borders on slapstick comedy. The anthropologist had arranged this enterprise to perform a gift exchange with the Tarunde who are, like the Utiarity, a subgroup of the Nambikwara. Despite Lévi-Strauss' choice of a slightly self-ironical comic tone, his narration barely conceals his strong fear during the event that, at times, borders on paranoia.

The story begins when Lévi-Strauss virtually coerces the chief of the Utiarity to assist him in this expedition to the Tarunde, despite the fact that the two tribal groups had been living in a rather precarious balance. Reluctantly, the chief finally complies after limiting the expedition to four oxen for carrying the presents. Immediately after their departure for the journey, which Lévi-Strauss retrospectively calls a 'grotesque interlude', his Brazilian companion notices the absence of women and children. "In travel books, such circumstances mean that an attack is imminent,"⁴ writes Lévi-Strauss, thus exhibiting his cultural *illiteracy* in his utter reliance on the extrinsic literary knowledge of travel books, that is, his own culture's imaginary construction of indigenous cultures and cultural encounters with the New World. Lévi-Strauss continues the trip in utter apprehension; yet as soon as they catch up with the rest of the group he is forced to acknowledge that, nourished by imaginary tales found in travel narratives rather than by actual experiences with the Nambikwara, his fears were groundless. It is, in fact, fear that induces the anthropologist to relinquish his actual experience of the other culture in favour of a projection drawn from his own cultural imaginary. Continuing the expedition, the Indians however lose their way, fail to provide food, and generate widespread discontent against the chief whom they hold responsible for complying with the anthropologist's request. Moreover, at the appointed meeting place, it becomes evident to Lévi-Strauss that the chief had coerced the Tarunde to come against their will.

Aware of the 'dangerous situation', Lévi-Strauss proposes the very gift-exchange that generates the *writing lesson*. Knowing that the Nambikwara

had not developed alphabetic writing technologies, he chooses as his first gift to the tribe a stack of paper and pencils, encouraging the people to write. To his delight, they fill their pages with minute wavy lines, careful imitations, if not abstractions, of the linear sequence of signs they know from the anthropologist's own notations. In retrospect, Lévi-Strauss reads this event as the 'advent of writing' among the oral tribe. In a sense, he already inscribes the 'prehistory' of writing within a teleological model of progress when he sets out to play this trick with his indigenous objects of study. It is, after all, designed to demonstrate his superior authority as an owner of what for the tribe is a new technology, namely alphabetic writing.

The "Writing Lesson" culminates in Lévi-Strauss' transactions with the tribe's chief. In the process of the gift exchange, the chief asks the anthropologist for a writing pad and uses it dramatically to change his role as prime native informant. Whenever Lévi-Strauss henceforth asks him for information, the chief, in response, takes his writing pad and begins to *write*. With a polite smile, he then hands Lévi-Strauss a sheet of paper filled with carefully drawn and perfectly regular wavy lines. Lévi-Strauss interprets this exchange as the effect of a hierarchical distribution of the power derived from the possession of writing. The chief, he argues, understands this power and uses it to gain authority over his tribe:

No doubt he [the chief] was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing. So he asked me for a writing pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face. But he never admitted this, and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher; his verbal commentary followed almost at once, relieving me of the need to ask for explanations.

As soon as he had got the company together, he took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects I was to give in exchange of the presents offered me [. . .].⁵

Lévi-Strauss reads the chief's simulation of writing as an attempt to gain authority only with respect to his own tribe. "The chief recognises writing as an instrument of power," he muses, assuming, as the quote shows, that the chief leads his people to believe he shares the anthropologist's secret knowledge of writing. Lévi-Strauss sees himself, in turn, establishing a secret complicity with the chief. In front of the tribe, he openly affirms the latter's writing competence, while, in fact, both of them tacitly acknowledge to each other the chief's mere pretense. Lévi-Strauss further assumes that, in this hierarchical distribution of writing competence, he himself gains power over the chief. The latter's successful performance in front of his tribe depends after all upon the 'unspoken agreement', namely the anthropologist's willingness to play along in the game and refrain from outing the chief as an imposter.

I would like to challenge some of Lévi-Strauss' assumptions about the emergence of writing. My own reading will foreground the problem of the aesthetic and its creative use as a mode of communication that relies on indirections, detours, performative speech acts and irony. It is the aesthetic dimension of the chief's performative speech act, I argue, which allows him to make a political intervention that unhinges the smooth operation of the cultural imaginary in the encounter between the Old and the New World. Derrida mentions the aesthetic aspect of the chief's speech act in passing without according it much importance because he takes the aesthetic value of writing as a given. However, in order to draw out the political implications of the chief's performative speech act we need closely to scrutinise a particularly imaginative use of the aesthetic as it relates to cultural practices of the exchange of gifts and information.

In the context of the chief's exchange with the anthropologist, the aesthetic mainly unfolds in the performative dimension of the transaction, that is, in the chief's simulation of knowledge and a tacit agreement with the anthropologist to conceal the simulation. I consider this performative simulation to play the crucial role in understanding what Derrida calls the 'aesthetic category'. It is the bilateral effect of the encounter's performativity that both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida miss in the 'writing lesson'. While Lévi-Strauss' observation that the chief plays a trick on his tribe may doubtlessly obtain, he remains oblivious of an entirely different trick being played by the chief with the anthropologist as his target. The chief's mock simulation of writing is a per-

formative action that operates differently for his double audience. For his tribe he may well pretend that he exchanges written information with the anthropologist, but to the anthropologist he also makes a metastatement about the intercultural exchange that is taking place right in front of everybody's eyes. Thus the metacommunication is carried out within the framework of a highly artful and performative play involving both the tribe and the anthropologist.

It is on the basis of this very metacommunication — not addressed by Lévi-Strauss or by Derrida — that the chief carries out a crucial element of colonial politics. The chief mimes the practice of writing as an instrument of power while at the same time using that very power against the anthropologist, thus subverting the latter's claim to superiority. Moreover, since he stages the simulation of writing as a performance for a double audience, one could argue that, rather than marking the 'advent of writing', the "Writing Lesson" constitutes an act of performative communication that uses familiar aesthetic devices such as irony, pastiche and metaphoric indirection. The aesthetic is thus displayed in form of a rudimentary artistic, if not literary, function in the chief's text. While the latter is, strictly speaking, not a literary text, we must agree with Derrida that the chief's scribbles undoubtedly constitute a use of *writing* in which the aesthetic is intrinsic. We witness the chief as the master of a highly playful performance that uses metaphor, pastiche and irony to direct an artful ruse against the one who claims the power.

Lévi-Strauss' view that the *writing lesson* demonstrates the 'advent of writing' among the Indian tribe falls, as Derrida has rightly pointed out, within a history of ethnocentric classification that relegates the Nambikwara to a prehistoric culture. Yet, if we read the episode against the grain of Lévi-Strauss' evaluation, we may learn a very different lesson that highlights the ruses of an adaptive mind capable of using 'writing' as a tool of imaginary inscriptions into the cultural unconscious. Curiously, Derrida, in his critique of Lévi-Strauss, has not paid attention to a highly conspicuous detail that gives the whole episode an ironic turn, namely the prime role of the gift exchange, which provides the context for the *writing lesson*. If we recall that Lévi-Strauss had urged the chief immediately to proceed to the gift exchange in order to ease a tense situation, the chief's performative irony in his simulation of writing can hardly be overlooked. Lévi-Strauss, after all, opens the

potlatch by presenting the 'gift of writing' to the tribe's alleged oral culture. In exchange, he expects the chief to serve as his native informant. But what does the chief give him in exchange? He returns the anthropologist's *gift*, albeit in form of an *undecipherable* simulation of writing that could be seen, at the same time, as a simulation of the anthropologist's gift. He returns an equivalent of what he received in the sense that the anthropologist's distribution of paper and pencils was, of course, not really a 'gift of writing' but a ruse that allowed him to use the tribe for an anthropological experiment. In this sense, the gift could be considered as unusable, if not given in bad faith. In response, the chief performs an exchange in which his simulation of writing dissimulates what, knowingly or unknowingly, appears as a travesty of the anthropologist's offer. Given that an anthropologist's 'gift of writing' to an oral culture operates within the framework of anthropology as a colonial practice, one could indeed read the chief's simulation of writing as a prime instance of a mode of indirection or 'mimicry'⁶ through which the 'colonial subject speaks'.⁷

In "Of Mimicry and Man," Homi Bhabha reminds us that colonialism "repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce," thus producing a "text rich in the traditions of *trompe l'oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition."⁸ Mimicry, for Bhabha, represents an ironic compromise constructed around ambivalence. As the sign of a double articulation, mimicry is "at once resemblance and menace."⁹ The chief seems to appropriate the very features that mark colonial discourse more generally, thus unsettling the distribution of power that is supposed to determine the hierarchy between anthropologist and native informant. Lévi-Strauss clearly experiences the chief's scribbling as a farce, albeit one in which he must become complicit lest he loses his native informant. Moreover, he is threatened by the chief's *mimicry* because in the very act of simulating the exchange of information the chief in fact withholds it. If we look more closely at this transfer, we realise that the chief operates with a complex bifurcation between the exchange of gifts and the exchange of information. While, in seeming compliance, he returns the 'gift of writing' in form of the sheets of paper filled with scribbled lines, he tacitly defies the anthropologist by withholding the desired information, thus negating his role as native informant. However, even this very act of negation still mimics writing as an unusable gift since, after all, the anthropologist presented the tribe not with written information but with undecipherable graphs.

The chief's answer to the anthropologist in the mode of *writing* thus constitutes a highly complex transaction that enables him formally to *comply* with the anthropologist's request, namely to participate in the potlatch and serve as native informant. He thus *follows* the potlatch rules, while at the same time playing at *withholding* the desired information. The fact that the chief later readily supplies that information further suggests that the act of withholding and the message indirectly conveyed through this act is more important in this speech act than the withholding of information as such. The chief performs his role as native informant in a language game that contains *his* information about the rules and modalities of gift exchange and cultural translation in a mode of metacommunicative indirection. I would argue that the chief's creative and artful shaping of the space that disconnects writing from referential information relies on his use of writing's intrinsic aesthetic dimension.

In "The Naming Game and the Writing Lesson" Marcelo Fiorini looks back at the exchange between Lévi-Strauss and Derrida from the perspective of several years of his more recent fieldwork among the Nambikwara. He argues that the use of silence, secrecy and erasure played out in the performative use of *writing under erasure* marks the language games of the Nambikwara more generally:

The performativity of holding the name or one's own knowledge of events in secrecy, of keeping them out of circulation, both emphasises the persona of the name bearer and entreats people at the receiving end of this speech act to "read," or respond to this withholding in the same way. Here silence itself can be seen as a dialogical utterance, for it subsumes a text contingent on the presence of a potential reader. It is as though the Manairisu played the *fort-da* game in reverse.¹⁰

In this larger context, one could argue that only one able to read through or between the *wavy horizontal lines* would be able to decipher the information given by the chief in a mode of *withholding*. One must see these lines as *writing under erasure* in order fully to understand the double nature of the 'exchange of secrets' between the anthropologist and the chief. After all, both participants in the exchange are aware of their respective games. The chief's indirect information comes in the form of a performative enactment rather than an indirect speech act in the narrow sense of the word. If the gift of the chief's

particular information about the gift exchange had been given directly, it might well have offended the anthropologist. It contained, after all, a barely disguised critique of the first gift: you have given us something we cannot understand or use, and in addition you have used your gift to play a trick on us. Fiorini insists that, with his act of mimicking the anthropologist in the gift exchange, the chief was not only acting in lieu of the foreigner but also comprising his own and his people's alienated position as a vehicle and instrument of this foreigner.¹¹ I would add here, however, that the chief's performance not only *comprises* the alienation of his people and his own role, but also *counteracts* this very alienation by recapturing an agency that allows him to invert the conditions of the anthropologist's power play. Most importantly, the tools of this reversal of power lie in the performative and artistic use of writing as a tool that engages the imaginary underpinnings of the transaction and thus intervenes in the cultural imaginary. Interestingly, the 'signs' used in this 'language game' are straddling the boundaries between pictograph and writing, art and literature.

Fiorini points out that the paper the chief feigned to read could have been perceived as a mere prop in a performance, or as a sign that the chief carried out a tacit agreement between him and the foreigner.¹² One could however also argue that the chief uses writing as a pictograph of sorts — understood here in the minimal sense of a performative language game that uses geometrical signs in order to communicate via indirection, play, and artifice. The chief would then have used writing as a medium of indirect communication that transcends literal meaning, using irony and pastiche as a source of pleasurable refinement. We might also consider the 'wavy horizontal lines' as literary in Roland Barthes' sense of a discourse in which the word or the form leads the idea.¹³ The knowledge the chief conveys in a quasi-literary or aesthetic mode, however, is only accessible to someone willing to enter the chief's language game and able to understand it in its function as the performative enactment of a different kind of information. We could transcribe the latter's effect of 'talking back' as follows: "No, I will not comply. This is *your* medium of power and I will not let you use it to assert your superiority but turn it against you." Lévi-Strauss misses such a reading because he assumes that the chief utilises writing only as the object of a mimetic staging of roles, performing a pure simulation of signs. Therefore he fails to perceive the chief's particular use of writing, its irony and its role in a performative language

game the meaning of which is conveyed via indirection and resides in its metacommunicative effect.

If we thus read the chief's simulation of writing as a performative enactment, the hierarchical distribution of power takes indeed a different turn from the one emphasised by Lévi-Strauss. Using the paper as a space of mimetic play, the chief turns the expected cultural self-representation that he is supposed to perform as a native informant into a performance about cultural otherness and contact, as well as intercultural communication. He thus performs a language game that contains a lesson that is less about the 'advent of writing' in the oral culture of the Nambikwara than about the 'advent of literature'¹⁴ in the sense of a performative use of *graphs* as a mode of communication via indirections and detours. Moreover, his intervention engages the imaginary ground on which the performative interaction takes place. One could thus argue that the chief performs a literary speech act at least in a very rudimentary sense. It is a speech act based on the performative and non-referential use of a sign for the purpose of a communication via indirection in which the *form* of the utterance takes priority over content. This speech act, moreover, constitutes a means of intercultural communication, one that relies specifically on the performative use of a pictographic aesthetic. More importantly perhaps, the advent of literature would in this case precede the advent of alphabetic writing. We may even read the episode allegorically, highlighting that in human psychobiology the natural proclivity to create *literature/art*¹⁵ may well precede the proclivity to create an alphabetic written language as a tool of storing and exchanging information.

Given the broad notion of writing, literature and the imaginary on which the above reading relies, a further elaboration of the use of these terms seems in order. If we look more closely at the exchange between the chief and the anthropologist, we notice that the chief performs much more than a simple imitation of writing. Ultimately at stake is that Lévi-Strauss and the chief display a radically different sense of simulation or, more to the point, mimesis. For Lévi-Strauss, mimesis is the imitation of an action — a relatively narrow notion that is already centred in a rather reductive definition of writing. For the chief, mimesis is performative and dynamic, engaging in a complex cultural exchange that produces difference rather than similarity. He thus foregrounds the gaps of knowledge between the players as well as the attempt

to engage the imaginary in order to bridge them. Moreover, the chief's meta-communication involves a precise, albeit indirect and highly playful statement concerning intercultural gift exchange. The chief's metacommunication addresses the very role of writing in the *cultural contact* with indigenous peoples, thus exhibiting the problem of the translatability of cultures more generally. He even plays with the role of writing as the anthropologist's *gift* to an oral culture, alluding to, if not inverting, the hierarchy that Lévi-Strauss perceives in this particular gift exchange.

The chief's ironical metacommunication addresses the asymmetrical roles the anthropologist seems to take for granted in his gift exchange with the indigenous people. According to Lévi-Strauss, he himself owns the supreme instrument of power while the tribe allegedly dwells in a state of innocence before the advent of writing. But the chief's intervention turns this asymmetry around, demonstrating that Lévi-Strauss faces problems in *deciphering* or translating information from a foreign culture that are ultimately not so different from the ones the tribe faces when Lévi-Strauss offers them the gift of writing. He thus also conveys a crucial insight into the difference between knowledge and information. Doesn't the chief's language game suggest that ethnographic knowledge, and perhaps intercultural communication more generally, requires a more encompassing understanding than one based on pure information? Addressing the signification of the whole exchange rather than merely answering the anthropologist's queries with the desired information, the chief playfully inverts the relations of power. He demonstrates his power to withhold information by cloaking it in an undecipherable coding, and one that is, quite shrewdly, used as a pastiche, if not caricature, of the anthropologist's own writing. The chief's response is thus a true act of colonial mimicry in Bhabha's sense of an ironic compromise that feigns compliance while it practices subversion. The chief demonstrates his power—and skill—to play the anthropologist's game while undermining its rules from within. In other words, he plays the anthropologist's game of withholding better than the anthropologist himself and therefore wins.

Read as a '*fort-da* game in reverse' (Fiorini) that operates as a metacommunication about imaginary substitutions and cultural transference, the episode reveals a dimension of power that escapes Lévi-Strauss despite his constant preoccupation with power. As Derrida has shown in detail, Lévi-Strauss' nar-

rative in the scenes that frame the *writing lesson* exhibits a rhetoric that borders on paranoia. As I have argued earlier, this paranoia emerges when the anthropologist 'reads' the tribe's actions on the basis of his own cultural imaginary, namely the colonial travel narratives. In fact, these scenes of fear and paranoia reveal that he is not free from a certain projective hostility toward the very tribe that he otherwise describes in such nostalgic terms as innocent and good. The fact that Lévi-Strauss orchestrates his narrative in distinct sequences that operate at different levels of abstraction is crucial in exhibiting the phases of a cultural transference that colours the events and their narration. Immediately after writing about the chief's playful performance as a withholding native informant, Lévi-Strauss relates how the chief continues with his performance during the gift exchange with the tribe. Lévi-Strauss evaluates this scene with a rather tentative conjecture: "This farce went on for two hours. Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to astonish his companions, to convince them that he was acting as an intermediary agent for the exchange of the goods, that he was in alliance with the white man and shared his secrets."¹⁶ The sharing of gifts has expanded to include a sharing of secrets. However, the sharing of secrets is not as mutual as it might look on the surface. As Lévi-Strauss would have it, the chief pretends that he shares the anthropologist's secret of writing. To those lacking the competence of alphabetic writing, the letters on the page appear as hieroglyphs that bear a secret. The secret allegedly shared between Lévi-Strauss and the chief, however, is the latter's ignorance of the secret of writing. Could it be that the chief also shares a secret with the tribe? Could they simply play along in the chief's scheme in the same way as Lévi-Strauss does, fully aware of the fact that the chief plays a game of 'giving by withholding' and perhaps even pretending that they are able to understand the meaning of the hieroglyphs that escaped the anthropologist? In that case, they too would share a tacit knowledge with the chief who, in turn, would skilfully play a double game of cultural negotiation. The very possibility of such a complex cultural negotiation never occurs to Lévi-Strauss, nor, for that matter, Derrida.

In *Marvelous Possessions*,¹⁷ Stephen Greenblatt explores the rhetoric of the marvellous that sustains the narratives of European encounters with the New World. Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss casts himself as the one who brings marvels to this world and the marvels he brings are precisely the 'marvels of writing'. "We were eager to be off," he says in yet another abrupt turn of his

narrative, “since the most dangerous point would obviously be reached when all the marvels I had brought had been transferred to native hands. So I did not try to explore the matter further.”¹⁸ In Lévi-Strauss’ narrative, the ‘transfer of marvels’, however, opens upon a transfer of a different kind, namely a complex cultural transference. In this transference, the ‘marvels’ function as a veritable allegory of the colonial imaginary and its exoticisation of the other. The latter’s rhetoric symptomatically displays the phantasmatic overdetermination of the anthropologist’s intercultural negotiations as well as his interpretations. The ‘transference of marvels’ obviously works simultaneously at the material level of an exchange of goods and at the ideological level of a cultural imaginary that exoticises those goods and fetishises them as marvels. Writing as a ‘marvellous possession’ obviously operates, for Lévi-Strauss, at both levels. Lévi-Strauss’ very use of the term ‘marvel’ must therefore be seen as overdetermined, signalling that the operations of the cultural imaginary imbue the real transfer (the gift exchange) with a phantasmatic transference that falls within the legacy of colonial fantasies. What turns writing into a ‘marvel’ is not only the power it conveys by transmitting information but also the different power it gains by withholding, circumventing or substituting information. In its refusal of mere referentialism, writing becomes a space in which indeterminacies and ambiguities reign supreme. Such a space becomes a fertile ground and container for imaginary projections and inscriptions that bear the traces of the cultural unconscious. Perhaps we may even stretch this point further by arguing that the chief’s performative politics relies precisely on a cultural exchange in which the anthropologist tries to acquire or gain access to the ‘marvels’ of the New World with the help of the marvels of writing. The chief’s scribbles would then simply highlight the place of the marvellous in performance, mimicry and inversion as they are played out in the encounters between the Old and the New World.

The *writing lesson*, in other words, opens upon a lesson on the cultural imaginary. “The abortive meeting and the piece of humbug of which I had unwittingly been the cause had created an atmosphere of irritation; to make matters worse, my mule had ulcers in its mouth,” Lévi-Strauss continues.¹⁹ (Why ‘unwittingly’, we may ask. What effect had Lévi-Strauss wittingly expected when he distributed the paper and pencils in the first place?) From then on, events precipitate each other in a slapstick mode. The ulcers cause the mule to rush ahead and then come to a sudden stop whereupon Lévi-Strauss falls

off its back and finds himself left behind in the bush, unarmed in a 'hostile zone'. Enter the imaginary travel narratives again which advise the anthropologist to fire a shot in order to attract attention. He fires three shots with the sole result that they frighten the mule and cause it to trot off. After hiding his weapons and photographic equipment, Lévi-Strauss runs after the mule. The latter lets him come close and jumps each time he tries to seize the reins, leading him further and further astray. Finally, in despair, Lévi-Strauss takes a leap and hangs on to the mule's tail until he is able to mount him again . . . only to discover that he has lost his equipment. At this point, paranoia reigns supreme: "The sun was sinking towards the horizon, I had lost my weapons and at any moment I expected to be pierced by a shower of arrows."²⁰ Just as he plans to start a bushfire, the Nambikwara return, free of any hostile intention. After finding his equipment, which was 'child's play' for them, they lead him back to the encampment.

This ending of the episode leads to another rupture in the narrative that now proceeds to Lévi-Strauss' evaluation of the *writing lesson*. During the sleepless hours of the night, he reaches his conclusions concerning the relationship of writing and power. Looking at Lévi-Strauss' own contextualisation of the writing scene, we note that his reflections on the power of writing and on his power over the chief come at the heels of the very episode in which he felt utterly powerless. Ironically, in both incidences related in this episode, he becomes the dupe of his own imaginary projections. The framing of the *writing lesson* with a highly humorous account of his failures in correctly *reading* the Nambikwara, turns into a *reading lesson* for Lévi-Strauss' readers. The anthropologist's story-telling exposes both his fear and a related tendency of paranoid projections of hostility onto the Indians, and it displays the retrospective use of writing to restore dignity by converting fear into humour. But it also suggests that the *writing lesson* itself is most likely coloured by the affective tensions due to a lingering fear of the Indians under which the 'experiment' of writing is conducted. Moreover, we might assume that the anthropologist's rhetoric of submission displayed in his self-portrayal as a powerless dupe of his own fears also serves to alleviate some of his guilt about the Western anthropological project. This assumption gains plausibility considering the fact that throughout *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss nostalgically mourns the natural state of the indigenous people that is threatened by the very importation of writing he describes in "The Writing Lesson." For

the reader of Lévi-Strauss' text the *writing lesson* thus also becomes a lesson that demonstrates the pervasiveness of the cultural imaginary and the complexity of intercultural transference in both actual encounters and their retrospective narration.

Intercultural transference therefore provides an apt framework to read the writing lesson differently. In their indeterminacy and overdetermination, the wavy horizontal lines on the white sheet of paper operate as empty graphs that invite imaginary inscriptions. Beyond their surface appearance as an attempted imitation of writing, these graphs reveal the complex power dynamic of a fully-fledged colonial *mimicry*. They form an artful metacommunication about writing, gift-exchange, power games and the ruses of the cultural imaginary. On the level of simulation, the scribbles appear like a metaphor of an unusable gift, while, on the level of metacommunication, they convey a message about intercultural exchange and transference. In using *writing* in a mode of performative indirection, the chief performs a cultural contact that produces an event precisely at the site where ethnographic knowledge is withheld. In this respect, the chief's use of *writing* resembles an artistic or poetic rather than a merely informative mode of communication. The 'writing lesson' thus also turns into a lesson for the reader. We learn more and different things about a culture once we expand our cultural knowledge beyond ethnographic information proper and include the effects of cultural transference. Apart from serving as props in the chief's performative enactment, the empty graphs also operate like a projective screen that invites imaginary inscriptions. We witness a negotiation that demonstrates how the deciphering of cultures and their *texts* is informed and permeated by the fantasies of the people who inhabit, produce or read them. Concrete information is embedded in a performative politics and aesthetics of cultural contact that we must learn to read before we can begin to decipher the information.

In sharpening our vision for such a different mode of deciphering, the aesthetics intrinsic in *writing* plays a major, yet often tacit role in shaping the modalities of cultural contact. By drawing the abstract lines across the sheet of paper, the chief performed a cultural intervention that resonated with the complex exchange of emotions that took place when Lévi-Strauss performed his ethnographic experiment with the tribe. The 'writing lesson' the chief taught to the anthropologist occurred within a cultural transference in which the exchange of gifts and information was revealed as part and parcel of a

hierarchical colonial politics. Above all else it was this lesson which the chief offered as his 'gift' to the anthropologist. Yet, it was a lesson in writing that the addressee was unable to receive because he read the wavy lines as an imitation instead of a performative speech act. More importantly perhaps, he could not receive this lesson because he operated on the tacit assumption that the chief's agency and power in this particular cultural exchange was limited to his tribe. Agency in cultural contact and negotiation, however, may slide from a passively adapting subject to a subject whose imaginative and adaptive mind shapes the cultural negotiation in turn. Lévi-Strauss perceived the chief as merely imitating the shapes of writing in order to adapt to, and use to his own advantage, the allegedly superior technology provided by the ethnographer. In my reading, the chief, by contrast, assumes agency in a situation designed to make him a mere agent in another's game. He forcefully demonstrates that cultural adaptation or even appropriation need not be passive or merely reflective, but can be imaginative, playful and performative. This claim on agency in cultural contact has profound political and psychological implications. A performative speech act or language game that remains sensitive to the vicissitudes of projections and transference, and mindful of operations of power that threaten the integrity of cultural boundaries, also facilitates a psychic processing and integration of cultural contact.

In "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art," Gregory Bateson argues that the problem of art is fundamentally a problem of psychic integration of the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind.²¹ I see a similar process of psychic and cultural integration at work in the chief's action. Rather than submitting to the rules of the game set by the anthropologist, he adapts them to his own cultural rules. His handling of the gift exchange integrates the foreign gift of writing without compromising the integrity of flexible cultural boundaries, precisely because he addresses both the conscious and the unconscious and unspoken dimensions of the gift exchange. The chief's 'graphs' then are intimately linked to his tribe's own cultural aesthetics or 'internal idiom'.²² They operate as agents that engage both his tribe's cultural imaginary and the intercultural transference with the anthropologist. The graphs serve, in other words, as vehicles for the internal processing of culture. Since their larger meaning unfolds subliminally, they straddle the boundaries between the two cultures and their unconscious, thus assuming both cultural and psychic valence.

We may finally draw a more general conclusion from these observations. My reading of the "Writing Lesson" suggests that, in order to understand intercultural encounters and modalities of cultural contact, we need a theoretical model able to account for the complex performances of intercultural transference that enter any exchange or translation between cultures. Cultural negotiations inevitably draw on the cultural imaginary and the cultural unconscious. In order to understand this interplay we need cultural politics and psychology as well as cultural rhetorics and poetics. Poetic, artistic or performative exchanges establish a tacit meta- or sub-text that not only reveals imaginary or unconscious investments in the other culture, but also plays across the boundaries of the official rules and codes of the exchange, often counteracting its presupposed hierarchies.

* Gabriele Schwab, Chancellor's Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of California, Irvine and member of the Critical Theory Institute, University of California, Irvine. Address for correspondence: Dept. of English and Comparative Literature, 435 Humanities Instructional Building, Irvine, CA 92697-2650.

Notes

- ¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, New York/London, Penguin, 1992, p. 411.
- ² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 120.
- ³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 124.
- ⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*.
- ⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 296.
- ⁶ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man, The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, pp. 85-92.
- ⁷ I think that the chief's response to the anthropologist presents an interesting instance that illuminates a condition under which a colonial subject or a subaltern subject can not only speak but also 'talk back'. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana/Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- ⁸ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," p. 85.
- ⁹ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," p. 86.

- ¹⁰ Marcelo Fiorini, "The Naming Game and the Writing Lesson," (unpublished manuscript).
- ¹¹ "It would be more accurate to presume [. . .] that Lévi-Strauss' 'chief' was playing an entire act of imitating the Whiteman. Evidently, here the mimesis of the act is more than simply an exercise in mystification, where the Nambiquara 'chief,' who alone had achieved the understanding of graphic representation, duped everyone present. By assuming the perspective of the Whiteman, the Nambiquara 'chief' was not only acting in lieu of the foreigner, but also defining his own position *viz a viz* (sic) the distribution of the goods in relation to the latter's alterity. [. . .] In sum, the mimesis performed by the 'chief' did not only comprise the alienation of his people (as well as the outsiders) by his mediation of the distribution, but it also embodied the alienation of his own role as a vehicle and instrument of an outsider, the Whiteman, Lévi-Strauss himself." Fiorini, "The Naming Game and the Writing Lesson."
- ¹² See Fiorini, "The Naming Game and the Writing Lesson."
- ¹³ See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Farrar, Strauss, 1977, p. 152.
- ¹⁴ I use literature here in a very broad sense that includes the performative use of signs for the purpose of irony, play and metacommunication.
- ¹⁵ See also Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus. Where Art Comes From and Why*, New York, The Free Press, 1992.
- ¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 296.
- ¹⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- ¹⁸ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 296 f.
- ¹⁹ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*.
- ²⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 297.
- ²¹ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. 128-156. See also Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1987. The formation of a cultural unconscious and the transmission of cultural values, tastes and even tacit codes begin with the earliest times of the acculturation of infants. What Christopher Bollas says about the unthought knowledge that we accumulate before the acquisition of language proper therefore also applies to cultural knowledge. In this sense, a tacit or 'unthought' knowledge operates at the level of the cultural imaginary and of cultural and intercultural transference.
- ²² I use the term in the sense of Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character, Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1992.