

# Indigenous Authorship in Fifteen Years of Letters

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## Abstract

There are many studies that analyze letters about indigenous peoples for a critical understanding of Brazil's political and literary history. In these analyzes, the epistles are treated as valuable archives for the creative processes of their authors, testimonies of notorious identity and political situations or historical/biographical documents foundational to understand our history. However, there is a significant gap in these researches and approaches when the indigenous becomes the sender of the letters, the author of this type of text, that is, when the biography, testimony or historical document was produced by the indigenous himself. In 2013, we prepared the project The Letters of Indigenous Peoples to Brazil to discuss this gap and to create the first virtual and physical archive of these correspondences - fundamental for the presentation of another view from Brazil, narrated and created by authorship of indigenous peoples.

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19 **Index terms**— letters; Indigenouspeoples; authorship.

## 20 1 I. Introduction

21 or over a decade indigenous peoples have written letters to Brazil. Letters about their dead, their political and 22 identity issues, their lands, their enemies, letters about their lives (COSTA, 2018). Today we have an inventory 23 of 664 letters, signed both collectively and individually by indigenous peoples. Letters that were produced in the 24 last fifteen years and made available on websites of non-governmental organizations and in social media platforms, 25 besides the letters in collections belonging to the FUNAI and in other archives. The other in these letters is 26 Brazil, the recipient of the correspondence. The Indians address their writings to presidents, the judiciary or to 27 Brazilians. Brazil is the vocative present in the Indian's desire to talk, but 'absent' in the answer, in the potential 28 interlocution pact that, often, epistolary writing requires. But why writing letters as a way to a conversation 29 with Brazil? What is the content of the indigenous epistolary dialogues? What is it about making Brazil the 30 recipient of these letters?

31 These questions are part of a larger set of thoughts that we have cultivated since the beginning of 2012, 32 with the development of the research project "The Letters of the Indigenous Peoples to Brazil". At the end 33 of 2013, we began to research the compositions of this type of writing and developed the research subproject 34 entitled "Indigenous Autobiographies in thirty years of letters" 1 1 Project funded by CNPq, with the main goal 35 of assembling the archive of indigenous peoples' letters, which are now circulating with broad repercussion on 36 social networks and news portals inside and outside Brazil, as well as letters outside the virtual space sent by 37 indigenous leaders to international organizations and to the Federal Government of Brazil, from the enactment 38 of indigenous rights in the 1988 Constitution until 2015.

39 The intention was to circulate the correspondence and to discuss the issue of authorship and the formation 40 of the indigenous autobiographical space. To our surprise, we found a high number of letters written annually 41 by the Indians, mostly in Portuguese, that were spread on websites of nongovernmental organizations and social 42 media networks during the period 2000-2015. We realized that these letters had a particular temporal agency, as 43 they followed the way the natives understood and responded to legal and historical imperatives that the Brazilian 44 State imprinted on their bodies. Not to mention that there was also a constant defense of the indigenous identity

## 2 II. WHY WRITING LETTERS TO BRAZIL?

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45 and territory, which reverberated in writings that called for the recognition of a differentiated citizenship for the  
46 peoples.

47 In addition to the issues raised during the first stage of the gathering of the letters, we were also particularly  
48 struck by the collective authorship of the indigenous peoples, registered in the signatures and compositions of  
49 more than three hundred letters. In these letters, we see in prominence, varying only the name of each ethnic  
50 group, the collective signature of the people, and in the body of the text the argument that the indigenous  
51 people is the true author of the writing. This puts in evidence not only the process of creation of these texts,  
52 but also the collaborative praxis developed among the Indians themselves for their preparation. Albert Braz,  
53 in his article "Collaborative Authorship and Indigenous Literatures", discusses the issue of author collaboration  
54 in indigenous literature, emphasizing that one of the defining characteristics of this literature is the incidence of  
55 the indeterminacy of a single writer (BRAZ, 2011). Long before Braz, in the late 1980s, Arnold Krupat (1989)  
56 discusses the same issue in *For Those Who Came After: A Study of Native American Autobiography*, analyzing  
57 who would be allowed to attach a single author name to the indigenous voice that always had in the anonymity,  
58 and in the no ownership condition, the base and foundation of its literature.

59 In order to deal with these issues recurring all along the research process, we decided to organize the  
60 correspondence produced by the Indians as follow: 1) Letters to the 500 years (correspondence that comprise  
61 the mark of the 500 years of Brazil and that were addressed to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso); 2)  
62 Letters to Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (correspondence that mark the arrival of the  
63 Workers' Party to the Presidency of Brazil); 3) Letters to the dead and denunciation letters (correspondence that  
64 denounces crimes against indigenous peoples, suicides among indigenous people occurred in the processes land  
65 'retake'); 4) The letters of the indigenous women (correspondence in which women repudiate the action of the  
66 State and of the farmers); 5) Letters of recognition or letters about the land (correspondence that communicate  
67 the self-demarcation of the indigenous territories). In this article, we will analyse the specificities of some of  
68 these correspondences. We will discuss the reason for the use of the letter as support for the conversation with  
69 Brazil, Brazil itself as the recipient of these letters and the ways of collective authorship construction among the  
70 indigenous.

## 71 2 II. Why Writing Letters to Brazil?

72 Barthes said that a letter is an encounter of knowledges between two subjects, a knowledge that acts  
73 simultaneously in who writes and in who reads (Barthes, 2008). For Foucault (2004), a letter is the very exercise  
74 of otherness, for the writer is made present to the one with whom they wish to speak. For Lejeune (2008), a  
75 letter is, by definition, a sharing that involves several people and has several aspects: "it is an object (that is  
76 exchanged), an act (that can be published)" (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 252), that is, a way of talking closely -although  
77 the subjects of the conversation are in different temporalities. In this process of sharing, the two subjects of the  
78 indigenous letters are a collective of actors. The senders sign it as plural -the people -and who receives the letter  
79 does it for a collective -Brazil. The two collectives of this way of conversation also have their ways of writing and  
80 of making themselves absent / present in the dialogical practice.

81 This dialogism, somehow, has always been present in the history of Brazil, from the Tupi correspondences  
82 of the "Camaroes" in the seventeenth century to the letter of Sonia Guajajara launching her pre-candidacy for  
83 Presidency in the twenty-first century. These writings are the result of complex schooling processes that some  
84 indigenous ethnic groups have undergone throughout our history -processes that, given the due differences of  
85 temporalities, are now part of the indigenous own political organization. The letters written by these peoples are  
86 an extension of some of these modes of organization. Therefore, to present the collective authorship of indigenous  
87 peoples, it is fundamental to understand the ways in which these authors write in their groups, collectives and  
88 associations.

89 Some of these organizations began with indigenous assemblies in the 1970s, supported by allies of the indigenous  
90 movement 2 . These gatherings were attended by indigenous ethnic groups from different regions of the country  
91 who met to discuss the state of their traditional territories and the policy of forced integration to non-indigenous  
92 society promoted by the Military Government 3 Usually, indigenous correspondence is produced in Portuguese  
93 and contains a summary of the group's discussion, including an introduction about the place, a description of  
94 indigenous ethnic peoples present at the time of writing, the purpose and the . After the 1988 Constitution, these  
95 meetings began to be organized at local, regional and national level, by indigenous leaders, teachers, women,  
96 elders and writers, gathered to deal with situations recurrently experienced by communities: the struggle for  
97 land, the assassination of leaders and the denunciation of other abuses and violence.

98 The outputs of these discussions found in the object / act letter its ideal format of diffusion and sharing. In  
99 2014, we attended some of these meetings and recorded the ways in which from the ability to translate orality  
100 to literacy, dialogues, decisions and discussions were agreed upon and produced collectively by members of the  
101 community. At the end of each collective meeting a letter was written and forwarded to the recipient, collectivized  
102 or singled out as 'Brazil'. At those moments, the letter-object was becoming a letter-performative act of presence  
103 and agency before the Other -the recipient of the correspondence -and before the sender himself who produced  
104 it. More recent thoughts on the indigenous authorship, such as those elaborated by Jane Stanford (2016), in  
105 her book *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire*, extend the discussion presented  
106 by Krupat (1989) by asking what happens when the romanticized subject of colonial literature becomes author

107 of the writing work that has always been considered characteristic of the language of the colonizer. Stanford  
108 questions whether a new type of writing is produced or if the indigenous author repeats the same models as the  
109 colonizer.

110 issues raised for the conversation. Sometimes this sequence is interspersed by personal stories, situations  
111 experienced with other indigenous and non-indigenous actors, and by mythical images and metaphors to explain  
112 their feelings to the interlocutor. We perceived that each people elaborates a different way of promoting this  
113 translatability, one of the most recurrent being the choice of one or more translators, generally younger natives,  
114 who had the necessary literacies to reproduce in writing the demands presented orally by the group.

115 The contours of this translatability demand an understanding of the role of the translator in the process of  
116 elaborating / assembling the collective letters. This is because the translator is also an editor of the text, but not  
117 with complete freedom to elaborate it, since his work is under the evaluation of the other Indians present in the  
118 discussion. Thus, words, expressions, images and metaphors undergo a continuous process of negotiation during  
119 the transcription, besides the fact that, at the end of the writing, it is necessary that the translator presents  
120 orally the letter for the acceptance of the other natives. On the other hand, it is the translator who executes the  
121 process of performative production of the text, he is the performer of the act of writing. The Indians do not  
122 simply choose the Indian who has schooling or who dominates the writing regulations, besides these attributes,  
123 it is necessary to have the body that transits between the knowledge of themselves, their village, their culture  
124 and the knowledge of the other with whom they are willing to talk.

125 In defining the translator, when referring to indigenous oral traditions, Lynn Mario de Souza (2006) draws  
126 a slight differentiation between the acts of writing and transcribing, noting that several elements of oral  
127 performativity do not appear in the written forms of some practices of transcription of indigenous narratives.  
128 Thus, Souza states, "the performativity of the oral tradition (...) is totally lost, making what was born as an  
129 oral process or performance becomes a mere written product" (SOUZA, 2006: 204). Souza is referring to the  
130 translations of oral practices of cultures with no written languages, in which storytellers choose some performative  
131 practices to present the narrative to an audience. "So, the authors who say they are simply writing (registering  
132 on paper) indigenous narratives as they were told are actually leaving out all the complexity and dynamics of the  
133 performative process of orally narrating" (SOUZA, 2006, p. 203) Unlike the translator's practice on these oral  
134 literatures, the letter translator is a 'transcriador' of the writing process; a plural 'transcriador', not only because  
135 they are not alone in the act of writing, but because they must be present in the active listening of the other  
136 voices that dictate and interact orally with the text at the same moment of its construction. The 'transcriador'  
137 is not alien to the demands of the community, on the contrary, shares the same collective desire of the group, is  
138 its own extension, and therefore translates the artifices of the oral performativity of its belonging to the letter.  
139 In this performance, the authorship is at the intersections of orality to writing, in the possible condition of their  
140 nonseparation. Perhaps for this reason it is possible to say that the natives who write letters perform this writing  
141 all the time, precisely to guarantee the authorial validity of the text.

142 We have selected two excerpts from epistles that exemplify this type of performance and which illustrate how  
143 a letter can be a collective act of resistance. The first of them was taken from the letter written in 2014 by the  
144 Munduruku of the Village Sawré Muybu that was sent to Brazilians to say why they decided to undertake the  
145 processes of demarcation of their lands themselves:

146 Indigenous Village Sawré Muybu -Itaituba/PA, November 17, 2014 de novembro de 2014.

147 Brazil, Our ancestors told us that the anteater is calm and quiet, stays at its place, does not mess with anyone,  
148 but when it feels threatened it kills with a hug and its nails.

149 We are like this. Quiet, calm, like the anteater. It is the government that is taking away our peace, it is the  
150 government that is messing with our mother earth -our wife (MUNDURUKU, 2014).

151 To be the anteater is to place oneself as a participant in the representation that is being presented, not to  
152 affirm a representation of itself -a Munduruku identity -as a value of its own authorship, but to produce a re-  
153 presentation, which calls into question their own body, because it relies on everything that exists as represent-  
154 able. And if this is true, the performance also rehearses a critique to the notions of representation and of the  
155 subject of the writing.

156 Another example of this is in the letter written on January 31, 2011 by the Kaiowá to congratulate President  
157 Dilma on her election and once again ask for the returning of their ancestral territory, their Tekohá: Dourados,  
158 January 31, 2011.

### 159 **3 President Dilma**

160 How nice that you have assumed the presidency of Brazil. You are the first mother who assumes this responsibility  
161 and power. But we Guarani Kaiowá wish to remind you that for us the first mother is the mother earth, of which  
162 we are part and who sustained us for thousands of years. President Dilma, they stole our mother. They mistreated  
163 her, bled her veins, tore her skin, broke her bones. (...) President Dilma, the issue of our land was supposed to  
164 have been resolved decades ago. But all governments washed their hands and were letting the situation worsen.  
165 (KAIOWA, 2011).

166 Here it is the recipient who is exposed to a radical extension / distinction of herself -not to a representation.  
167 The set of being mother, land and being Brazil itself is what builds the paradoxical sense of this dialogism  
168 constituted to express the absence of the recipient, in the same proportion in which it makes it present in the

#### 4 III. THE INDIVIDUAL RECIPIENT / INTERLOCUTOR BRAZIL

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169 temporality and in the context of the narrative. Whois writing performs its own condition of sender, not to  
170 guarantee the possibility of the encounter, but to say, even as a final alternative to the willingness to converse,  
171 that who is there is much more the person than the character of the writing. With a little correction: the person  
172 does not have a noun -it is an ethnic people, a village, a community.

173 The collective authorship of the letters also presents a way of understanding that "we are all many when we  
174 write, even alone, even our own life" (LEJEUNE, 2008, 118). The principle of authorship between indigenous  
175 people allows such collaborative practices and, as Lejeune himself advocated, allows not to legitimize the idea of  
176 a divided self, but to express "the articulation of the phases of a writing work that presupposes different attitudes  
177 and links who writes both to the field of texts already written and to the demand that he has chosen to satisfy  
178 " (LEJEUNE, 2008, 118).

#### 179 4 III. The Individual Recipient / Interlocutor Brazil

180 A significant part of the collective letters written by natives were elaborated in the aforementioned meetings as  
181 authorial manifestos of the people to demand of Brazil and the Brazilians acknowledgement and responses to the  
182 situations of abandonment, violence and death suffered by indigenous in their villages. The constant addressing  
183 of letters to Brazil directed our research to the selection of this recipient as the first methodological principle for  
184 the creation of the virtual archive of the letters of the indigenous peoples. An emblematic letter of this selection  
185 was written by the Mehinaku and Xavante ethnic peoples on April 22, 2000 and addressed to the Presidents of  
186 Brazil and Portugal, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Jorge Sampaio respectively:

187 We are here with all truth of our tradition.

188 No rancour, no anger. But we're not celebrating anything either. This is not our celebration.

189 Despite all the distance and difficulty, we came because we have to talk to you.

190 We are here to make a new contact. Our ancestors, our grandparents accepted the "gifts" that you left to  
191 bewitch our people and thought it was an attitude of true friendship. They believed that by accepting the  
192 presents you would respect us, that we would be protected. But this story repeats itself. The attraction fronts  
193 continue to use this same tactic to attract and deceive our relatives who do not even know that Brazil exists.  
194 (XAVANTE; MEHINAKU, 2000).

195 Writing to a Brazil that is not even known to exist to make a new contact is to rely on the letter not as a text  
196 that forces correspondence, reciprocity, but as an act that mobilizes those who write towards their own self-care.  
197 This is because the exchange itself is not the main action that defines the purpose of the letter for the natives, but  
198 rather the need to create meanings for their relationship with their interlocutor, even in the absence of answers.  
199 Liz Stanley tells us about this necessity when defining the 'letter intention' as an essential characteristic of the  
200 genre letter, because it says of "the intention to communicate [...] to another person who is 'not there', because  
201 removed in time / space from the writer, and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response " (STANLEY,  
202 2015, p. 03). 4 Although you have not sent us a letter, we want you to be aware of our thoughts and support  
203 us. When you were a candidate, we sent you a first document and we have not received a response In writing  
204 a letter as self-care and / or willingness to say, a correspondence can be addressed to a whole society, people or  
205 community, who can also be the senders of a letter, although for that, respectively, one has to personalised the  
206 receiver as the president, or if the place of the translator is performed in the name of the People. On the other  
207 hand, although a continuum of reciprocity exists even in those who only intend to communicate, the letters are  
208 still social practices that involve a specific type of encounter between who writes them and who reads them.

209 This is what we observed in our second selection of letters to Brazil sent by the Yanomami, Terena and other  
210 indigenous peoples to presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff:

211 Watoriki, January8, 2003.

212 Mr. President:

213 We, Yanomami, are happy because you were elected president. You promised to improve Brazil, so we,  
214 Yanomami, are also expecting this. The intention to communicate [...] to another person who is 'not there'  
215 because removed in time/ space from the writer and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response. 5  
216 Letter dated September 16, 2002: "Very well, now we, Yanomami, want to hear your words. You leaders of the  
217 Whites write a letter to us Yanomami leaders, because we also want to hear your words. We look forward to your  
218 letter here [in the forest] " (YANOMAMI, 2002). people at the 5th World Social Forum 6 We, Terena mothers  
219 from Mato Grosso do Sul, relatives of the murdered indigenous Oziel Gabriel raised our voice to denounce the  
220 continuity of the process of forced colonization that has been reproduced today in our country. We are tired of  
221 sending documents and knocking on the doors of government offices and not receiving any answers to solve the  
222 serious problems we face (INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF BRAZIL, 2005).

223 Honourable Ms. Mother of the Brazilian Nation -Dilma Rousseff, 7 However, the lack of response is a stimulus  
224 to writing of more letters, as is made clear by the and mothers of other Terena Warriors, who at this historical  
225 moment risk their lives in the retake of our lands, feeling powerless in the face of the gravity of the situation and  
226 fearing new deaths among our children, poor and rich, Indians and non-Indians; but we are watching our children  
227 being massacred by the public force commanded by this same mother of the nation. Instead of protecting us,  
228 she closes her eyes so as not to see our suffering and covers her ears so as not to hear our cries of pain and  
229 mourning, refusing to solve the issue and not even sympathizing with the indigenous cause or becoming sensible

230 to the slaughter of our people in our state. What kind of mother is this that hugs the strong and kills the weak?  
231 (TERENA MOTHERS, 2013).

232 Considering that the Yanomami explicitly request the continuity of the dialogue, or that the different indigenous  
233 peoples gathered at the World Social Forum continue to write letters with no answers from their interlocutors,  
234 or that the Terena mothers narrate the murders of their children and appeal to the conversation, we could say  
235 that the notion of correspondence among the Indians surpasses the very idea of interlocution that we constructed  
236 throughout this article. The Brazil-recipient, represented by its Presidents, is absent in responding and solving  
237 the problems presented, but he is the actor of an unanswered reciprocity, because the absence of responses does  
238 not interfere in the process of continuing the conversation, since the epistolary intention will always be present.  
239 This idea is at the basis of Sarah Poustie's argument that the letter does not lose its characteristics when it does  
240 not express an intention of exchange or possibility of reciprocity. For the author, "The paradox here is that, by  
241 referring to unsent letters in sent letters, they are in effect sent and reciprocity, exchange and communication  
242 concerning them follows." (POUSTIE, 2010, p. 27) indigenous peoples gathered at the World Social Forum,  
243 stating that the lack of resolution to the problems presented in the correspondence with the Government has  
244 become the motivation for the writing of a letter denouncing the colonization processes. Thus, the absence of  
245 the Brazil recipient does not mean the absence of the characteristics of a letter or a discouragement to writing;  
246 on the contrary, the Indians exploit the recipient's silence as a metaphor for their relationship with the Brazilian  
247 society, which makes the letters of the indigenous promoters of new configurations for the epistolary genre.

## 248 5 IV. Indigenous Epistles and the Contours of the Research

249 Epistolary writing has always been present in the history of Brazilian literature. From the earliest colonial  
250 writings to the contemporary ways of writing letters, the conversations between writer and recipient present us  
251 biographical pacts, and temporal and intellectual landscapes of our own history.

252 In Brazil, many studies analyse letters produced about indigenous peoples for a critical understanding of our  
253 political and literary history. In these analyses, the epistles are treated as valuable archives of the creative  
254 processes of their authors, testimonies of notorious political situations and / or as historical / biographical  
255 documents fundamental to the understanding of our history. However, there is a significant gap in these studies  
256 and approaches when the Indian becomes the writer of the letters, the author of this type of text, that is, when  
257 the biography, testimony or historical document was produced by the Indian himself. There is even doubt about  
258 the authorship of the text and the immediate association with the idea that it would not be possible for natives  
259 in Brazil to write letters (or any other type of text), especially when writing is directly linked to the 'Brazil' prior  
260 to the "New Republic".

261 However, this genre of writing has been among natives since the seventeenth century with the introduction of  
262 alphabetic writing by the European colonization. Some of these letters were translated in 1912 by the historian  
263 Pedro Souto Maior (MAIOR, 1913), others are still untranslated and available in the Archives of the Royal Library  
264 (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) of the Netherlands in The Hague (Nationale Bibliotheek van Nederland), as is the case  
265 of letters from the indigenous Antonio Paraopeba, Pedro Poty and Felipe Camarão. These correspondences find  
266 in the contemporaneity of the correspondences produced by Marcos Terena, Gabriel Gentil, Azilene Kaingang  
267 and Sônia Guajajara, Brazil in another version of its own history, safeguarding the due temporal distance.

268 In the new stage of the project The Letters of the Indigenous Peoples to Brazil, we decided to invest in  
269 the selection and analysis of the individual letters written in different periods of the Brazilian history in order  
270 to analyse the ways in which different indigenous leaders, by biographing their own lives, tell another story of  
271 Brazil. In order to do so, we decided to search for indigenous letters in three important periods of our literary and  
272 political history: 1630-1680 (before Brazil), 1888-1930 (in the nation Brazil) and between 2015-2018 (in current  
273 Brazil).

274 From this new focus, we intend to create a file of these letters on a digital platform -a space for other studies  
275 on epistolary writing in Brazil, as well as for the diffusion of another version of Brazil narrated and created by  
276 indigenous peoples. This platform will contribute to the dissemination of a previously undisclosed literary and  
277 historical material that can be freely accessed by public school teachers, university researchers, linguists and  
278 historians belonging to national and international research and teaching institutions.<sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Partnership with anthropologists, indigenists, linguists and other members of civil society organizations. It is worth mentioning the partnership with the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), linked to the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> The official project foresaw that indigenous people, as a group that was evolutionarily inferior to the ideal civilized model, should "evolve" into the general Brazilian status by means of forced integration, using instruments such as the imposition of the use of the Portuguese language, expulsion from the traditional lands and labour market insertion. © 2019 Global Journals

<sup>2</sup>© 2019 Global Journals Indigenous Authorship in Fifteen Years of Letters<sup>6</sup> The World Social Forum is an alter-globalization event organized by social movements, with the main goal of developing alternatives for a global social transformation whose motto is another world is possible. The fifth Forum was hosted in the city of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>7</sup> Oziel Gabriel, 36, was shot dead during a land repossession action of the Buriti farm in Sidrolândia, state of Mato Grosso do Sul.



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