

# Hypertext and Ethnographic Writing

*Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez*

If all language is, in essence and in practice, the systematic repository of the collective awareness of the society that uses it, how can the ethnographer use his own language to write about a collective awareness that is not his own? How can he write so that he may properly represent this foreign collective awareness (which he can only partially share with the society that possesses it) without it sounding like a lot of gibberish? One way or another, through the use of native terms, some degree of progress is made, and the moment finally arrives when the book or article about a particular aspect of the society being studied leaves the ethnographer's hands, though he is certainly aware that what he has said is, inevitably, only an approximation that will require a considerable amount of correcting and polishing. As an ethnographer, in the end, you grow accustomed to this feeling of being overwhelmed by a social reality that is foreign to your own. It is actually far more difficult to regain fluidity in your own language – after days and days of forcing it and stretching it to its absolute limits in the attempt to wrap it around foreign physics and metaphysics, one's own language often feels as though it has lost its own elasticity, as if it has been stretched so very far that it can no longer return to its normal state of use.

The ethnographer experiences precisely the opposite of what the poet experiences in the exercise of his craft. Like the ethnographer, the poet is also in the business of stretching language to the limits of what it is possible to express, but what he explores, to the point of dizzying vertigo, are the curved edges of a world built by language itself, and the result is that of not only broadening and modifying that world, but of honing and strengthening language itself – the language that defines the world by giving it names. The ethnographer, on the other hand, sets out to attain an impossible objective: he tries to stretch his own language in an effort to wrap it around the world created by another language. Sometimes, the yanks and tugs are so violent that the resulting text is illegible and he must toss what he has written into the trashcan. Sometimes he simply elects for silence, as does the ethnographer in the story by Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>1</sup> There are other times still when the effort seems to leave

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the ethnographer rather incompetent in his own language, unable to resume speaking with natural fluency or grace. Every word reminds him of too many different things at once: the exercise has not facilitated the multivocality of words, nor has it increased the number of definitions for each word in his mental dictionary. No: what happens is that the words are no longer comprised of lexical meanings, the conventional verisimilitude of synonyms has disappeared, syntactical categories have become permeable and auxiliary verbs no longer fulfill their function. As such, the ethnographer no longer knows how – in fact is no longer able – to speak with authority, that is, as possessor of the language and the world it names.

Nevertheless, the use of academic jargon serves to hide this linguistic disorder. And so, protected by the conventional terminology of the discipline, aided by the editors' style sheets, deceived by the complicity of our colleagues in academia, we continue writing or speaking as if we were using the same language we learned as children. But this is a poor imitation that only serves to reproduce the disciplinary discourse and, in the end, does not refer appropriately to any world at all – neither the world we inhabited and now wish to write about, nor the world which we inhabit in our everyday lives, with our neighbors, our families and our students. It is as if the radical, demanding practice of ethnographic writing, in the end, has left us without language.

Perhaps, in light of this sudden stuttering spell, hypertext serves as a kind of therapy – or rather it may serve as the accurate expression of the ethnographer's hesitation. Hypertextual writing provides an escape from assertive, monological statements about the other. It allows the author to reproduce, with an acceptable degree of fidelity, the analogical sinuosities that emerged in the field when the ethnographer had conversations with people who jumped, quite unexpectedly, from one topic to another, making associations that he was not familiar with. Why, if we were talking about the end of the world, is this person now talking to me about this season's honey harvest?

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Perhaps I ought to clarify, first and foremost, that I am speaking about 'hard' hypertextuality and not the 'weak' kind, which refers to the use of hypertext links that simply add complementary images, graphics or text as very long footnotes to the main body of writing. In the kind of 'hard' or 'strong' hypertextuality that I am referring to, the links are rather different. They avoid the demonstrative style and instead exhibit the non-hierarchical use of several different kinds of logic, from analogy to topology, homophony or genealogy. The effect, to a certain degree, is similar to that which is experienced by the reader of fictional hypertexts. Here, the random manner in which the reader travels over the hypertext links produces bifurcations which give way, each and every single time, to an entirely different essay. (With a different conceptual argument? Generating virtual controversy with itself? Allowing a 'wild' perception on the part of the others?)

In literary works, fiction in particular, electronic hypertextuality makes it possible for one single text (which, in practice, is in fact a pre-text) to offer a multiplicity of

narrative programs, crisscrossed and fragmented stories that never become enshrined in one canonical version. In its totality, this multiplicity is like a literary representation of a bit of gossip in which different social actors give their version of the facts as they see them. And this is, in turn, a metaphor for polyphonism, despite the fact that in reality there is only one voice speaking – that of the author – who presents himself to the reader as if he were, in fact, many authors. The reader, navigating through these hypertext links, may come to envision himself as a co-author of the story. And even though he may be rather conscious of all this, and not at all naïve, though he may not harbor any false illusions about his role, he may nonetheless end up with the sensation that he is in fact updating the story as he reads it, producing a text that is exclusively his, unrepeatable – a sensation that, in turn, offers the additional and familiar pleasure of being distinct, different. Paradoxically, the medium that is the broadest and potentially most open to mass consumption suddenly becomes the most personalizable and intimate of all. The story is updated differently with each performance, just like in the oral tradition, acquiring a value based on use. That is, the story's value is inextricably linked to its individual use – and this is something that happens far more than we might have supposed or acknowledged in the case of the analysis of the interpretation of classic texts.

Some of these characteristics, perhaps with another signification, do emerge in the hypertextual essay, but we may also identify other qualities that respond to questions of argumentation and the construction of verisimilitude, and that is what we will consider in the following pages. They constitute a commentary and reflection upon the possibilities and effects of the electronic hypertext in the ethnographic description of foreign cultures. As my example, I will use an electronic book of which I have been both the inspiration and co-author, along with four other Americanist anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> The book in question, *Según cuerpos. Ensayo de Diccionario para uso etnográfico* [Regarding Bodies: A Dictionary Essay for Ethnographic Use], is the result of a three-year seminar on Ethnographic Writing at the Fundación Xavier de Salas. In the pages that follow, I will transcribe a few paragraphs of the printed version of one of the voices (of which I am author), and then four possible readings based on the various links included in the first version, with words that pertain to texts written by me or one of the other four co-authors. The topic of the book – that is, the pretext for this experimentation – is that of the representations of the body, and contains five voices or entries: Aberturas (Openings) by María García Alonso; Deformidades (Deformities) by Pedro Pitarch; Interioridades (Interiorities) by Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez; Sustancias (Substances) by Julián López García; and Tránsitos (Transits) by Juan Antonio Flores Martos.

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This first version comprises the three first paragraphs of the entry entitled 'Interiorities'. The terms that offer hypertext links are identified with a simple underline, whereas those that have the double underline are words that, looked up in each case at random, will generate another, different version of the text.

Version 1. Linear (printed)

*Interiorities*

In the interiorities of the body there is an abundance of things that require our attention, many of them hidden. Teresa de Jesús knew this and said as much: 'These interior things are so dark to our understanding, that someone who knows as little as I do will be forced to say many superfluous and even imprudent things, in order to say one thing that is accurate and true. Whoever reads this will need patience, for I have had to be patient when writing about the things I do not know; and certainly there are times when I take the paper, like something foolish, and I don't know what to say or how to begin.'

In the typical rhetoric of dictionaries in Spanish, the note that tells of the figurative sense of a voice begins with the expression '*dícese*', which means 'is used as such'. And so, the word 'interiorities' is used as such for that thing that has been imagined and thought of as a space or position of being inside, as opposed to an outside, with an exteriority that is equally imaginary. It is much like speaking of 'entrails': the entrails of the body, of the earth, of the soul, of the city, of the State or the castle; that which has been inserted in places to which access has been restricted; places where visibility is limited, hearing is inconvenient and the text is forbidden. Intimacy is the condition and the effect of the access people have to interiorities. The invention of something interior makes it possible to conceive of intimacy as a value, as a kind of safe-passage that, only under certain conditions, will permit access to interiorities.

These interiorities, however, slip away in a constant effort to escape, creating and interposing new distances in the face of any exploration that removes the meaning from the successive provisional borders between inside and outside. As the gaze moves deeper, interiority flees, leaving behind dresses and naked skin, inching toward flesh, bones, viscera, humours and, later on, the allusion to cells and genes, to the memory and the entrails of the soul, to the history of the species and its long-forgotten avatars. With each threshold that is crossed, with each limit that is exceeded, a catholic imagination begins to envision some spaces that grow more and more rank, as well as others that grow more and more subtle: nudity and modesty; the heart and its passions; the intestines and time; worms and the soul. To prepare oneself to enter these interiorities involves preparing a gaze to be alternatively sidelong or penetrating; a gaze that either withdraws from the lustful or noxious carnality, or gravitates toward the tenuous, almost evanescent rooms of the interior castle.

*Commentary on Version 1*

In this case, each paragraph may be regarded as a kind of sequence (the minimum unit of action, with the same actors).

The first sequence identifies the difficulty of the task at hand, and solicits the indulgence of the reader; it is an introductory sequence that from the very start, despite its ceremonial function, establishes the issue – which will be reiterated in the other sequences – that the study of 'interiorities' must conquer: the difficulty that

arises from the fact that these are 'forbidden' things and, as such, their constitution depends on the insistence and the acuity of the gaze.

The second sequence is the one that establishes the thematic field and broadens the perspective of the gaze into a kind of wide-angle lens that allows us to consider issues that only seem to have 'interiorities' in the metaphoric sense: the City, the State, the Castle. This aperture does not, however, imply easy access, because intimacy is the barrier that restricts the access of the gaze, though of course differently in each case.

The third sequence is a kind of traveling shot that increases the depth of our field of vision, the penetration of our gaze. By looking at the things that are furthest away (in this case, those which are most interior), everything around them seems to flee and become blurry.

These three paragraphs, on the other hand, are like a metonym for the totality of the text. They are like a little musical composition: *introit + adagio + fugue*.

## Version 2: Following the 'earth' link

### *Interiorities*

In the interiorities of the body there is an abundance of things that require our attention, many of them hidden. Teresa de Jesús knew this and said as much: 'These interior things are so dark to our understanding, that someone who knows as little as I do will be forced to say many superfluous and even imprudent things, in order to say one thing that is accurate and true. Whoever reads this will need patience, for I have had to be patient when writing about the things I do not know; and certainly there are times when I take the paper, like something foolish, and I don't know what to say or how to begin.'

In the typical rhetoric of dictionaries in Spanish, the note that tells of the figurative sense of a voice begins with the expression '*dícese*', which means 'is used as such'. And so, the word 'interiorities' is used as such for that thing that has been imagined and thought of as a space or position of being inside, as opposed to an outside, with an exteriority that is equally imaginary. It is much like speaking of 'entrails': the entrails of the body, of the earth, of the soul, of the city, of the State or the castle; that which has been inserted in places to which access has been restricted; places where visibility is limited, hearing is inconvenient and the text is forbidden. Intimacy is the condition and the effect of the access people have to interiorities. The invention of something interior makes it possible to conceive of intimacy as a value, as a kind of safe-passage that, only under certain conditions, will permit access to interiorities.

The link to the word 'earth' leads us to this:

The uneasiness regarding the exit is accentuated when the limits of the cities graze the limitless sand. Just beyond its borders the menacing world unfolds. Flecker's fear in front of the gates of Damascus is an example of the uncontrollable anxiety brought on by the unknown:

'Four great gates has the city of Damascus . . .  
Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear, . . .  
Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard  
That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird? . . .  
Pass out beneath, O Caravan, Doom's Caravan, Death's Caravan! . . .'

Gary Gossen's Chamula informers, just like the English poet, feel uneasy about what lies outside of their community. For them, the earth is an inclined, vaguely square-shaped island that is higher in the east than in the west. In the center, the true navel of the world, lies their municipality. Their central location and relative altitude afford them a special relationship with the sun, the central god – a relationship that no other Indian or *mestizo* community enjoys. Consequently, they see their native municipality as the only place of true safety and moral rectitude. As social and physical distances increase, they feel more and more threatened by danger. In the abysses of the earth live demons, strange human beings, and wild animals.

Following the 'animals' link, we move on to this:

It is the 'living gold' that is very different from the dead gold that anyone can get by purchasing a ring or a pair of earrings at a market. Live gold comes from 'the ancients', those people who, when the Spanish arrived, were deceived by the devil who told them to hide away with all their treasures under the earth. They did this, thinking it would save them and their possessions but they never made it out from their voluntary burial. This 'living gold' exudes a vapor, the 'antimony' that makes men fall ill, turning them into 'the antimonied'. In Taday, a bit further to the south of Ingapirca, there are entire neighborhoods of 'the antimonied', because their houses are close to the *huacas*, the burial mounds of the gentiles. There, in Taday, María Anguisaca gave birth to a baby boy with a harelip. This happened because her house was built in a 'bad position'. There, the chickens, for example, were born with twisted legs, and one of her nephews had died in the following way: 'his face swelled up, his neck dried out until it was nothing but a slender string, and then his entire body exploded'. María changed the position of her bed, and her other children were born normal, but since there was 'live gold' buried somewhere in the house or patio, every so often animals would come out from under the earth – rabbits, little birds, partridges – shining in the sunlight and eluding all potential captors. Shining ears of corn had also been seen there. (This is how Carmen Bernand tells the story.)

Following the 'harelip' link, the reader arrives at this:

Closed creatures tend to be infertile, unproductive beings. Their metaphoric occlusion renders them unable to properly manage the fluids that, in essence, are the creators of life, even when they are perfectly 'healthy' bodies in their organic structure, as are adolescents, for example, before their ritual initiation.

When guayaquí boys have grown sufficiently *yma*, strong and vigorous, and begin to desire women, they are not permitted to make love to them unless they are truly men. To be considered as such, a young man must ask his main father for permission to pierce

his lip, celebrate the *imbi mubu* and wear the lip ring that exhibits, to one and all, his new status as a hunter and potential lover. Achieving this – to say nothing of the process of becoming a full adult – is no simple task: first, a ceremonial stone is used to slice a canal down his back and then a mixture of charcoal and honey is poured into the open wound, in order to properly show off the scar to the rest of the world. It is excruciatingly painful, and ‘the blood flows in abundance, covering the young man, the arms of the officiant, the tree, and the ground all around them’. The first ceremony is requested; the second ceremony is suffered.

Following the ‘blood’ link, I read:

On another occasion, Atamók said: ‘A long time ago now, to the same end, an old woman, Sitibibí, grabbed a thorny cactus and showed the women how to paint their foreheads. The old woman said: ‘This is what I shall give to you, to all of you. I am going to paint your faces. And you should continue to paint your faces this way, because they will look much prettier.’ With a thorn, the old woman scratched them until the blood trickled down their foreheads and noses. Then she drew lines that resembled crosses on their foreheads. At the end of five days, their entire faces had been painted, plus they had scarred by then, and were very pretty. ‘Now, girls, you are truly beautiful, and this is what you must continue doing. Young women must paint their faces, as well.’ And the women continue to do that, to this very day.

#### *Commentary on Version 2*

In this version it almost seems as if the two first paragraphs have come together to form one single introductory sequence in which, after acknowledging the difficult nature of the issue, the topics to be discussed are presented.

As such, the second sequence is where the author plunges into the topic of interiors. Though the ‘earth’ link was selected, we suddenly find ourselves before a series of verses that refer to the interior of a city, Damascus – to its gates and, as such, its exterior–interior dynamic. The exterior of this city is every bit as dangerous as the exterior of Chamula, a tiny indigenous village in Chiapas. And then when we move on to the link for ‘animals’ (something that is always thought of as ‘exterior’), we find ourselves in the company of animals of living gold that dwell in the earth’s interior. We have arrived at the earth, then, through an indirect as opposed to a direct link, through these animals of the past and the interior.

As we click on ‘harelip,’ we move on to a text about guaraní rituals in which the lower lip is pierced to create a human being. Everything is an act upon the body, its appearance, its exterior – much like when the reader clicks onto the word ‘blood’ and sees the incisions and scars.

In brief, after the two first introductory sequences, the following two sequences refer to interiors, and the last two to exteriorities.

### Version 3: Following the 'soul' link

#### *Interiorities*

In the interiorities of the body there is an abundance of things that require our attention, many of them hidden. Teresa de Jesús knew this and said as much: 'These interior things are so dark to our understanding, that someone who knows as little as I do will be forced to say many superfluous and even imprudent things, in order to say one thing that is accurate and true. Whoever reads this will need patience, for I have had to be patient when writing about the things I do not know; and certainly there are times when I take the paper, like something foolish, and I don't know what to say or how to begin.'

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Following the 'soul' link:

It is said that form is the manner in which matter is distributed throughout the body. But this is because we tend to focus only on solid bodies; their rigidity establishes their mass and volume. Nevertheless, people are also made up of liquids and gases.

In what way may gases and liquids produce distortions? That which is solid is stable, fixed. In liquids and vapors, however, measurements become vague; they change and fluctuate. Breath, intestinal gases, the soul, are not easily distorted.

I follow the path indicated by the word 'gases' and read:

Once again, the interior of the earth and the interior of the body appear connected; once again we see a confluence and a similarity between interiors. Could it be that interiorities are a dominant category that impose their characteristics on any and all recipients? Or are these similarities simply the result of our inability to represent ourselves and our different interiors – the hidden insides of the earth and the body – in a truly singular way? Because, while the interior of the earth contains, for many people, hell and all its demons, the interior of the *tzeltal* heart (according to P. Pitarch's description), in addition to the bird and the thick shadow of the *ch'ulel*, also contains the lab, a series of characters that recall our own interior demons and which also live both in the heart and in the outside world. They are quite varied: they may be animals, meteorological phenomena, or beings that cause sicknesses, like bishops, scribes or Jesuits. All of these characters, up to thirteen of them, dwell in the gaseous material inside the heart while their doubles, of solid, normal material, act in the world.



And I opt to follow the link 'demons' and I return to a paragraph I saw before in Version 2, when I clicked on the 'earth' link. So, 'demons' and 'earth' have taken me to the same place.

The uneasiness regarding the exit is accentuated when the limits of the cities graze the limitless arena. Just beyond its borders the menacing world unfolds. Flecker's fear in front of the gates of Damascus is an example of the uncontrollable anxiety brought on by the unknown:

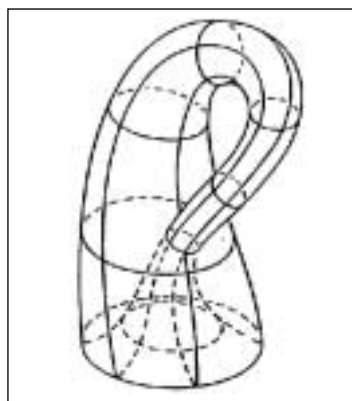
'Four great gates has the city of Damascus . . .  
Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear, . . .  
Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing. Have you heard  
That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird? . . .  
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Now, instead of seeing, as I did the previous time, what happened by entering through the word 'animals' (version 2), I decide to visit the link 'limits' and I arrive at a commentary on a fragment of an Aztec codex.

These are the twenty letters or symbols they used for all their numbers and which, they claimed, exercised their power over man, as we can see here. And in this sense they used them medicinally when someone became ill or felt pain in some part of the body. *Bufo*<sup>3</sup> had influence over the liver; *rose*, over the nipples and trembling of the tongue; *eagle* had influence over the right arm; *ayra*, the right ear; *rabbit*, the left ear; *flint*, the teeth; *air*, the breath; *female monkey*, the left arm; *dog*, the heart; *malinalli* (grass), the intestines; *lizard*, the female womb; *tiger*, the left foot; *serpent*, the male sexual organ, almost as the thing that is the origin of its evil. In this sense they believed the snake, no matter where it came from, to be an omen foreshadowing all the others, and medics also used this figure when they cured someone; depending on the day and time someone fell ill, they would check to see if the sickness was in alignment with the reigning sign. With this in mind, we may deduce that these people were not quite as beastly as some people have believed, because there was so much order and intricacy in their things, and because they used the same media that astrologers and doctors in our time use.

Since maps, in reality, do not delineate anything more than limits, we can safely state that this is the opposite of a map, an Atlas. The definition of the word 'limit' (the idea that a person cannot be inside and outside at the same time) cannot be applied in this case. A person does not have well-defined limits; a person is like the Klein bottle, where the front and the back converge.



*Commentary on Version 3*

Clicking on the link to the word 'soul' we might well imagine that we will connect to a passage regarding the 'interior things' to which St Teresa refers in the first paragraph. Yet we find that this second sequence is constructed not according to the interior–exterior disjunction but, rather surprisingly, around the opposition between the solid and the non-solid (gases + souls) as an opposition that corresponds to that which is stable or fluctuating, in order to remind us that fluids only possess the shape of their container; on their own, they have neither form nor deformation of any sort. On the other hand, if fluids do take on the shape of their container, what is singular about them? What is 'mayan' about a soul that takes on the form of the body in which it dwells?

But in addition to equating the soul, according to our cultural convention, with vital gases (breath or gas from the superior orifice of the body), this sequence also unites the soul with the gases of the inferior orifices, the intestinal gases.

I follow the path of these 'gases' and I find myself reading a disquisition on 'the interior' and the convergences between the interior of the body and the interior of the earth, with the suspicion (of a nominalist sort) that the only bond uniting these two diverse concepts – the imagined interior of the earth and the even more imaginary interior of the heart – is, in fact, the word itself: 'interior'. And then when I follow the 'demons' that inhabit both interiors, I return to Damascus and Chamula – that is, to the question of the limits between one and the other. And this, in the end, is yet another oblique way of appealing to the internal when facing the external.

To leave these interiors, I follow the 'wild animals' and, in effect, a system of correspondences between animals and body parts (external or internal) eliminates the limits that, in the previous sequence, seemed to be established as the caravan trooped through the desert.

Now it is Klein's bottle, the development of the Moebius loop, that serves as the conclusion.

#### Version 4. Following the 'modesty' link

##### *Interiorities*

In the interiorities of the body there is an abundance of things that require our attention, many of them hidden. Teresa de Jesús knew this and said as much: 'These interior things are so dark to our understanding, that someone who knows as little as I do will be forced to say many superfluous and even imprudent things, in order to say one thing that is accurate and true. Whoever reads this will need patience, for I have had to be patient when writing about the things I do not know; and certainly there are times when I take the paper, like something foolish, and I don't know what to say or how to begin.'

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These interiorities, however, slip away in a constant effort to escape, creating and interposing new distances in the face of any exploration that removes the meaning from the successive provisional borders between inside and outside. As the gaze moves deeper, interiority flees, leaving behind dresses and naked skin, inching toward flesh, bones, viscera, humours and, later on, the allusion to cells and genes, to the memory and the entrails of the soul, to the history of the species and its long-forgotten avatars. With each threshold that is crossed, with each limit that is exceeded, a catholic imagination begins to envision some spaces that grow more and more rank, as well as others that grow more and more subtle: nudity and modesty; . . .

Clicking on the hypertext link on the word 'modesty' I arrive at this text:

And the main reason you should wear clothing is because you ought to feel shame walking around as you do, some of you even in the nude, exposing your indecency (both in front and behind) for all to see, and so I must repeat that it is terribly necessary that your flesh remain entirely covered.' In this light, skin becomes an interiority that is to be protected from the wounds inflicted by the simple gaze of the other. José de Acosta was exaggerating when, in 1576, he stated that 'the licentiousness and procacity of the Indian women is terrible, and modesty is all but unknown to them', and yet his age-old reaction has been relived over and over again in our modern age, rather painfully. In the 1970s, Georg Grünberg was traveling with a noncommissioned officer of the Paraguayan army who shot and killed, from his car, a young *aché* woman who was doing her wash in a stream. When Grünberg asked the man why he had done such a thing, the man replied: 'I felt shame when I looked at that Indian woman, filthy and naked, that's why I

killed her!’ The woman’s naked body crumpled and fell into the stream, and the oily sheen of her skin blended in with the shining water. She would have been a lot better off had the *aché* traditions been a bit more similar to those described in the Quechua myths about Inkarrí, whose wife ‘was dressed in a rainbow-colored *lliqlla*, and she also wore a bodice and a hat. She had twenty skirts in all: the first one was made of white cotton; the second one, of cotton dyed red; beneath that was another cotton skirt with a magnificent silver border; followed by a thin skirt of llama wool, then others of alpaca wool, and the last one was made of vicuña wool with a gold and silver border, and dyed with the blood of her husband, Inka.’

Clicking on the ‘skirt’ link:

They also believed that anyone who dreamed of being a transvestite while in the maternal uterus could indeed become one. According to one of the stories, told by a Mohave shaman who was a friend of Kuwal, the informer of this researcher and the husband of various *alyhâ*, sometimes there was no preparation at all leading up to the rite. On occasion, the boy would spend the night between his mother and maternal grandmother while, in another dwelling, four men who had dreamed of the ceremony would sew the skirt for the *alyhâ* while singing what the god Mastambho had taught them. The next day, the boy would be brought to an esplanade, where he would be met by the cantor as well as the various other people invited to the ceremony. The two women would bring the boy to the center of a circle and then, standing there with him, the cantor would begin to intone his chants, and the boy would dance to the rhythms of this music just like a woman would, occasionally acting out a pantomime to each song. After the four ritual chants, the boy would be immersed in the Colorado River, and would be given his skirt. Now, dressed as a woman, the *alyhâ* would take a name appropriate to his adoptive sex, and would be able to contract matrimony.

When he found a husband, the *alyhâ* would simulate menstruation by scratching his inner thigh with a stick until he drew blood, and would demand that his husband observe the traditional taboos regarding the wife’s first menstruation. Fellatio and anal sex were among their sexual practices and, according to Kuwal, the *alyhâ* would allow his spouse to caress his flaccid penis while telling him that he had a beautiful vulva.

Clicking on the hypertext link to the word ‘center:’

The interior of the body is like another strange being that protects itself beneath the shell that is the skin, like a mollusk we have brought along and given a face and a body as a kind of mask. Francis Ponge wrote this about them:

« Le mollusque est un être *–presque-une– qualité*. Il n’a pas besoin de charpente mais seulement d’un rempart, quelque chose comme la couleur dans la tube.

La nature renonce ici à la présentation du plasma en forme. Elle montre seulement qu’elle y tient en l’abritant soigneusement, dans un écrin dont la face intérieure est la plus belle.

Ce n’est donc pas un simple crachat, mais une réalité des plus précieuses.

Le mollusque est doué d’une énergie puissante à se renfermer. Ce n’est à vrai dire qu’un muscle, un gond, un blount et sa porte.

Le blount ayant secrété la porte. Deux portes légèrement concaves constituent sa demeure entière.

Première et dernière demeure. Il y loge jusqu'après sa mort.  
Rien à faire pour l'en tirer vivant.

La moindre cellule du corps de l'homme tient ainsi, et avec cette force, à la parole, –et réciproquement.

Mais parfois un autre être vient violer ce tombeau, lorsqu'il est bien fait, et s'y fixer à la place du constructeur défunt.

C'est le cas du pagure.»

So, what do we make of this hermit, this arthropod, that walks laterally across the beach with a shell that was not his? Is this not the image of a soul in a constant struggle with its body, dragging it grudgingly? Because Teresa de Jésus wrote that 'everything slips from us in the indelicacy of the setting, or near this Castle, which are these bodies. Well, we must consider that this Castle has many dwellings, some very high, others very low, and others to the sides; and in the center and between all of these dwellings resides the principal, which is where the very secret things between God and the soul occur.'

#### Commentary on Version 4

The traveling shot with which the first sequence ends is quite violently interrupted when we click on 'modesty' and arrive at an excerpt composed of four brief references that contextualize, morally and ironically, the ethnocentric concept of modesty. Though it is rather unorthodox, it is something like a footnote inserted from a place of supposed complicity with the reader, in which we do not find the necessary academic reference, but it is still a footnote, all the same.

The following excerpt, which leads us to the 'skirts' link, is a bifurcation that, surprisingly, breaks through our own sense of modesty, rendering us scarcely more tolerant than Father Acosta or the Paraguayan soldier we met earlier on.

When we click on 'center', however, we return to the elliptical style found at the beginning. After the words of Francis Ponge, the excerpt ends with Teresa de Jésus, just as it began. The 'center' allows us to draw a circle, on the border of which nudity or repressed sexuality hover.

\* \* \*

This task of creating new groupings, new texts, by building on pre-existing fragments or leftovers is what Lévi-Strauss called, on some very memorable pages, the work of *bricolage*, characteristic of savage thought in general and mythical creation in particular. As in the creation of myth, hypertextual ethnographic writing builds a different story each and every time the reader 'navigates' through the text that is studded with hypertext links. By doing this, the reader behaves in a manner similar to that of a social actor who updates a mythical story, adding different variations each time. But here the *bricoleur* is not the myth, as in the Lévi-Straussian metaphor, but the social actor himself. Here it is not the myth that disposes of the finite but

almost limitless wealth of perceptions with which he builds his argument through the logic of sensitive qualities. Here, it is the social actor, the reader-author, who takes on the role of the *bricoleur*, by electing – according to his own particular taste – some excerpts and not others that the author has posted on the web and made available in the reference text. And this social actor makes associations between these fragments with a logic that he is unaware of – because it is really the logic determined by the principal author to establish the relationship between the words selected. And yet though it may be unknown, it is no doubt a very peculiar logic in that it eludes the constrictions of the non-contradiction principle and follows an itinerary determined by the most random of associations (homophonic, synonymic, antonymic, analogical or topological).

The body and the rhetoric of its representation, primarily in Amerindian cultures, is the topic of the text that has been used as an example in the previous pages. The result, when we compare the different versions that emerge from the exercise of hypertextuality can be called, quite literally, monstrous – that is, ‘a production against the accepted order of nature’. If we use the old metaphor of the text as a body (‘the body of the text’ with its ‘header’ and its ‘foot’ notes), we may say that its fortuitous recomposition produces something ‘against the accepted order’ – a monster or, if you prefer, a *cyborg*. Now then, as we consider this textual being that is so apparently monstrous, with feet where its head should be, or perhaps without head or feet altogether, who or what does it represent?

Perhaps it is the *cadavre exquis* that comes to mind. And I think this is the best metaphor we can use to describe what other cultures are to us. Despite our very professional efforts, their ambivalence, their multiple knots of ambiguity, their logical or moral contradictions preclude them from fitting neatly into our image of a system. Nor is it, as we so often hear these days, a fractal because its potential to generate chaos is so much more limited. Naturally it is not a puzzle, because the pieces do not fall into place in conjunction with one another to create a meta-form. And it is even less comparable to a kaleidoscope, that specular trick that reiterates, ad nauseam, symmetrical figures that converge upon a central point. Nevertheless, the very topology of the *cadavre exquis* does offer the image of a foreign culture, without domestication, in which the ethnographer has lived. And its rhetoric, its manner of connecting, in one performance, precisely the things that have been separated in another, is what most resembles this experience which, on the other hand, is nothing other than the acquisition of the operational mode of *la pensée sauvage*. Of *la pensée* that the two share through hypertext.

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## Notes

1. I refer here to the story entitled 'The Ethnographer' in the collection *In Praise of Darkness*.
2. (<http://www.etnologiamericana.org/view/libro-online.php>).
3. Dauphin de l'Amazon. The Amazon river dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*). Also called *boto*, *bufeo* and pink dolphin, it is common in the turbid waters of the Amazon and Orinoco river basins. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109655> (retrieved 22 July 2006).

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