José de Anchieta: Performing the History of Christianity in Brazil[1]

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The Jesuit order played a central role in creating new strategies aimed at restoring Christian ideals. Indeed, early Portuguese colonial discourse reveals that the Portuguese assigned themselves a central role in the future of humanity and in the restoration of world Christianity. However, as the constant conflicts in India had already proved, and the encounter with the natives would later confirm, such a narrative of global restoration might have served to assimilate, to some degree, the novelty revealed by the New World into Christian mentality and history; but it did not convince non-Christian peoples of its "universal" validity. Representatives of Christian colonial powers soon realized that they had to create specific mechanisms of communication in order to convey this newly formulated history of the universe to peoples who, as they believed, "did not remember" their true Christian past. In order for communication to be established and the world to become One again, the foundation of a new discourse and a new pragmatics had to return from overseas, circulate within Europe and sail back to the new territories. The Jesuits created a global network of narratives and manuals whose purpose was to reform the ideals of universal Christianity and, at the same time, assimilate the New World, both symbolically and materially.

In this article I discuss some of the textual practices used by the Jesuits—particularly, by the Jesuit priest José de Anchieta (1534-1597)[2] in his longest and most important play, the *Auto de São Lourenço*—to replace both the native symbolic orders and the habits of "corrupted" Christians with a universal history aimed at restoring a hypothetical Christian past. The Jesuits' project of reforming Christianity within Europe, I argue, informed their strategies for

introducing the Christian doctrine into the reality of the New World and resolving local conflicts. Loyola's (1491-1556)[3] guidelines for individual conversion strongly determined their strategies for the conversion of New World communities, which were often constituted by both European settlers and Natives. Ultimately, the goal of Anchieta's plays was to overcome ethnic differences by promoting the transformation of both Native and European cultures according to the structure of confession. The division inscribed by the reflection upon the past should efface contextual differences and unite communities around the promise of future reconciliation—a promise that should remain associated with the figure of the missionary. Furthermore, this division was intended to equate all individuals and construct them as childlike subjects who would be open to the expression of God's will and, consequently, ready to receive the institution of Christian doctrine. These plays thus gathered different peoples, in order to create, on Brazilian soil, the prototype of a community without divisions, and the figure of a new world in which ethnic diversity would be the very basis of prospective religious homogeneity.

Anchieta's plays illustrate how the Jesuits sought to create the image of a new (European) world by producing representations of an interminable dialogue within a diverse, but ultimately peaceful and fraternal community. Jesuit discourses and practices served not only to assimilate Brazilian Native cultures, but also to accommodate those elements in European history that were heterogeneous and difficult to reconcile. Whereas Anchieta's own mystical writings aim to produce the "I" as the result of what De Certeau has called the "*mutations de la parole*" [translated into English as "mutations of the spoken word" (*The Mystic Fable*, 15)], the work of the educator must engage in a different relationship with language: an assignable "you" (the learning subject) is required in order for any doctrine to be conveyed. Moreover, it is the "you" that has to be situated, defined and finally named. Unlike mystical speech, this new instance of Anchieta's discourse is no longer the divine entity that, as it is addressed, speaks, or rather promises to speak through an emptied "I." For the educator, language must become an instrument through which a supra-subjective "I" (Truth, God, etc.) conveys a meaning to an actual, finite "you" through an actual, human "I." This attempt at dialogue, which seeks to fix the locus of the listener, constitutes a fundamental aspect of Anchieta's several books of catechism and confession. With the purpose of better attaining this goal—of making his/God's word heard—Anchieta often wrote these texts in Tupi, the language of the Natives

he wanted to address and thereby convert to Christianity. In order to ensure that the Natives could listen to and decipher his words he anticipated their answers—along with their identities—and situated them within a fictional dialogue that also could be employed by other missionaries:

P: Ereroyrõpe nde rekópuéra?
R: Aroyrõ.
P: Ipoxype nde rekópuera endébe?
R: Ipoxy.
P: Ndererojebyrib´potáripe nde rekópuera?
R: Aáni. (*Doutrina Cristã* 132: bk.1)

[Q: *Do you hate your past habits?*
A: *I hate them.*
Q: *Do your past habits seem ugly to you?*
A: *They are ugly.*
Q: *Don't you want to go back to your past habits?*
A: *No, I don't*]

By thus anticipating, or rather prescribing his interlocutor's answers, the missionary strives to teach each aspect of the Christian Doctrine, while demanding that the listener deny, by means of the enactment of an already programmed confession, each aspect of his or her life which the missionary believes to contradict Christian doctrine. The missionary induces the Natives' self-effacement through the revision and condemnation of their habits. Furthermore, by introducing confession, Anchieta seems to believe that he cannot only change the Native's habits, but ultimately turn their words into the expression of God's will. Indeed, in one of his letters Anchieta writes that, according to a Native child, "the force of confession was so great that, after it, it seemed to them that they wanted to fly straight to heaven with great speed" (*Cartas*, 109). The work of the missionary is thus to educate and seduce, according to a specific pragmatics which produces the other's name (as a fictional entity) through the repetition of the addressee's position in the dialogue. This dialogue serves to construct the other's identity according to a relationship in which the disciple would seek to decipher the missionary's speech.

And yet, the Christian missionary seems not to master the alterity represented by his disciple. It was perhaps this sense that his/God's message

could not be conveyed to the Native Brazilians, or even to the Portuguese settlers and local mestizos that made Anchieta look for additional strategies of catechism. Anchieta's plays, on the other hand, were not so much intended to convey a message or doctrine to his disciples as to induce them to experience a divided Christian subjectivity, by means of a practice that resembles the one proposed by Loyola's *Exercises*: "For just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and priming our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul" (97). The purpose of Anchieta's plays was to expose internal conflicts in order to resolve them by calling for mystical—and social—unification. Thus, the same elements that we find in Anchieta's mystical poetry and short dialogues are present in his plays: the performance of a division, the effacement of the self, the construction of a subjectivity that is defined by debt and one's incapacity to speak to the other, and the definition of identity through faith, or through the ritualistic pretense of restoration. But the goal of the performance, as we have seen, was to incite the participants and the audience to confession and communion. On the one hand, the play had to lead them to fix and narrativize the locus from which confession could be performed. On the other hand, the learning subjects had to address and assign power to the entity that gave them their own proper names: in this case, not just God, but the Jesuits who represented God's will.

Anchieta's *Auto de S. Lourenço* (c. 1587) reveals how the Jesuit missionary sought to transpose the construction of the individual Christian subject to the level of the community. Loyola's methods of contemplation, "colloquium" and prayer are turned into a heterogeneous discourse in which the dialogue is inscribed within the speech of a collective "I" who addresses a virtual, external "You." The play is structured as a progression from the representation of the individual, mystical subject to a stage of communal unification attained through the reiteration of the division between past habits and present reality. At the end, the play represents a unified voice that, while it expresses an infantile innocence, also remembers and condemns the history of the community in such a way that this duality ritualistically stages a future restoration. By assimilating elements of medieval theater as well as of Tupi rituals into a structure similar to Loyola's *Exercises*, Anchieta creates a

hybrid performance that seeks to convey the foundations of Christian doctrine to an audience constituted by Europeans, Natives and mestizos.

Whereas the *Exercises* demanded that each disciple visualize the battle between Good and Evil, the dramatic sections of Anchieta's play seek to represent the actual image of that battle to a large audience gathered around the scene, in order for collective conversion to be attained. The audience should watch and ritualistically perform the conflict, just like Loyola's *Exercises* required one to stage comparisons in order for the "I" to be founded as the emanation of God's will. Anchieta's play resembles Loyola's "meditation on hell" (the fifth exercise of the first week), which directs the initiate to "see in their imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell" and "ask for an interior sense of the pain suffered by the damned, so that if through [their] faults [they] should forget the *love* of the Eternal Lord, at least the *fear* of those pains will serve to keep [them] from falling into sin" (46, my emphases). The notion of "fear" is an essential stage in one's conversion, since it announces, by contrast, that which cannot be represented: the love of God. On the fourth day, the *Exercises* further direct one to "consider how Christ calls and desires all persons to come under his standard, and how in opposition Lucifer calls them under his," (65) and "summons innumerable devils, disperses some to one city and others to another, and thus throughout the whole world, without missing any provinces, places, states or individual persons" (66). Thus, in order to express God's will (or Love), the self has to become the scene of a confrontation, in such a way that one may consider the distance between "the standard of Satan" and "the standard of Christ." The tension between Good and Evil, or between fear and love should, according to the *Exercises,* lead to the rebirth of the "I" as an imitation and, moreover, as a direct manifestation of God's will. One would become such an impersonal "I" by first visualizing a picture of the world in which the Devil takes control of it and converts all peoples, and then by reversing that same scene and picturing how Christ can perform a similar, but final conversion: "Consider how the Lord of all the world chooses so many persons, apostles, disciples, and the like. He sends them throughout the whole world, to spread his doctrine among people of every state and condition" (66). Individual conversion in the *Exercises* can therefore be attained only after one has visualized Hell, almost as if one had to let oneself be converted by the Devil before being converted to Christianity. Moreover, the trace and memory of this first conversion must not disappear, but, on the contrary, must return as

a threat that continuously provokes fear. Conversion is only attained through the visualization of the two stages of "universal" conversion, that is after one has pictured the world under Satan's sway, followed by the return, through a conversion by Jesus, to the original "standard." In other words, one must visualize Satan's rule or standard, the memory of which would enable one to visualize God's, and therefore understand the necessity and desirability of its expansion throughout the world. It is this temporal narrative of rupture and restoration that Anchieta attempts to translate to the Tupi symbolical order. Furthermore, he must construct an image that conveys the very essence of this division, and identify a single signifier that is both the expression of threat and reconciliation. It is the image of "fire" that performs this role of conveying a meaning that is always shifting between two opposites.

The image of "fire" is intended not only to overcome the distances between languages and between cultures, but also to underscore the unstable oppositions between literal and figural discourses, saying and meaning, past and future, destruction and restoration, death and rebirth. While it is possible that the Tupis associated Tupã with lightning and fire, the action of the play initially associates fire (*"tatá"*) with destruction. Anchieta himself wrote elsewhere that the Native Tupi believed in a spirit called *baetatá* (the "fire thing"), which was something like a flying flame that presumably traveled and killed the Natives (*Cartas*, 128). Moreover, according to the legend, Guaixará, the Tamoio devil, was also associated with fire, and represented the threat of one being set on fire. In the play, Guaixará defines himself as "añangusú myxyra" (145), that is, "the great burned [or, literally, 'roasted'] *añangá*" (nocturnal traveling spirits). In addition, *tatá* is Anchieta's translation for "Hell," and the space to which the Native Tamoios, as well as all other Native enemies who were not converted by the Jesuits, had been sent after they were defeated in battles against the Portuguese.

The image of fire thus represents, at first, the locus of sheer destruction, but it is soon contrasted to the newly created Christian village ("*taba*"), where even former foreigners or enemies find protection and may live in harmony with the community. Thus, it expresses an ambivalent semantic field in which narratives of death and destruction must turn into a promise of salvation (or protection). This movement is staged according to a narrative that parallels the burning of Saint Lawrence represented in the first scene, at the same time that it displaces it. Whereas the burning of Saint Lawrence in the beginning of the play represents his sacrificial death, at the end of act 2

the Indians are burned as a form of punishment for their crimes and are held accountable for the death of Saint Lawrence. From the outset, Guaixará, the self-proclaimed "great roasted *añangá*," compares Saint Lawrence's qualities to his own and to those of his two fellows: *"Akó Rore kae, jandé rapixá mixyra"* ("that burned Lawrence, roasted just like ourselves") (150). In addition, whereas Guaixará himself confesses to being the author of the death of "Bastião" ("Saint Sebastian") and "Roren" ("Saint Lawrence"), saying, *"ixé aé sapysaroéra / sekobé abé resy"* ("I am the one who burned him and roasted him alive") (150), Aimbirê reiterates the narrative according to which Saint Sebastian had set Guaixará's canoe on fire. The play thus stages the confrontation of two rival groups constituted of saints, on the one hand, and Native devils, on the other, each characterized by having burned and having been burned by the other. The roles are thus constantly reversed, until the Natives are finally condemned by Saint Lawrence to be burned on a bonfire.

By deploying the image of fire, in both the European and Indigenous languages, as an unstable signifier, Anchieta situates conversion in the space of linguistic ambivalence. Whereas act 2 deploys "fire" in order to translate Christian notions into the Tupi language according to a narrative of rupture and restoration, in act 3 "fire" appears as an image of both difference and identity which resolves internal conflicts and overcomes linguistic as well as cultural differences. Not only is this section of the play written in both Spanish and Tupi, but now both the Europeans and the Natives speak each other's languages. The purpose of the performance is no longer to constitute Christian subjectivities through notions of rupture and restoration, but to reunite Europeans and Natives in a single shared history—which is also a history of rupture and restoration.

The works of Jesuit missionaries sought to define the limits of such a subjectivity in the intersection between two external forces, derived from the potentially imminent repetition of past experiences, on the one hand, and the future achievement of a previously promised happiness, on the other. History was to be reiterated in the form of a collective memory that, in addition to narrativizing the past, was also aimed at shaping future actions. For this reason, it was important that the Natives learn, before anything, *how not to forget*: their own names, their past customs, their enemies, their own history, and the eschatological history that was not their own, but imposed on them through the interplay between promise and threat. In other words, only if the members of the newly constituted community remembered their (true or constructed) painful past, could they keep their own promises and, more

importantly, desire that which had been promised to them. Rather than the actual past, it is the group's temporal projection of the promise into the future that constitutes *a common culture*, even though those narratives about the future emerge from the heterogeneous memory of past events.

The strategy of Anchieta's missionary plays included, in addition to rewriting Christian history, the eradication of conflicts which were internal and external to the Christian faith, represented by the remaining Indian customs, as well as the dangers represented by emerging Protestant "heresies." By transforming both images into mnemonic agents, his missionary works aimed to create a community whose divided speech—torn between painful memories and the promise of restored happiness—united its members toward a common future. What Anchieta's *Auto de S. Lourenço* aims to produce is a collective Christian subject capable to make promises. Furthermore, like Loyola's *Exercises*, it is intended to constitute the original place in which a dialogue or an exchange with God becomes possible. Anchieta ultimately seeks to convey in his play, as well as in his poetry, the space of a divided subjectivity that says nothing—and yet, expresses its desire to speak (to) God. Communication occurs only in the shared interval defined by the distance between God's divided message—for it is both a threat and a promise—and the sinners' double language of confession—characterized by fear and love. But for Anchieta, "fire" is not simply a metaphor for individual conversion. "Fire" represents the single locus of multiple gazes, as well as the gaze that creates the possibility of community. The world shows no opposition to the Christian faith insofar as this opposition is what defines it. The play seeks to convey nothing but the space from which the world, reunited by a shared division, can speak (to) God. And this shared division reconciles past histories as well as present realities within a single discourse whose meanings are always shifting between opposites, including between the literal and the figural. It is from this semantic movement that temporality is conveyed and with it, the promise of unification, or the stable meaning of God's will.

Anchieta sought to re-inscribe the Native Brazilians into the Christian lineage, which they had perhaps "forgotten." If their original innocence is no longer seen as undivided, they remain innocent insofar as they are now represented as Christian children who demonstrate no resistance to the institution of Christian doctrine. Moreover, they represent the common future of the community, regardless of the different ethnicities or past histories that constituted it. The colonial discourse of Christianity thus

assimilates differences symbolically, at the same time that it seeks to efface them materially. Its universalistic discourse seeks to resolve contradictions, and yet it must not efface them completely. And if cultural manifestations are no longer associated with a history, not even with an ethnicity, they can always be displaced and appropriated. Anchieta's work thus prefigures a model of nationality that conciliates the antagonisms of a diverse community according to the discourse of a global, universal order that never presents itself. Rather, this order remains as a promise of development, articulated by a paternal figure who teaches the community its own identity.

Notes

[1] This article is a very shortened version of a chapter of my forthcoming book *Promises of History: Assimilation and Prophetic Discourses in Colonial Brazil (1500—1700).* On the question of translation in Anchieta, see Braga-Pinto, 1996.

[2] José de Anchieta was born in the Canary Islands, the son of Spanish parents. At the age of 17 he entered the Society of Jesus. Two years later he was sent to Brazil as a member of the mission headed by Padre Luis da Grã; six months later he had already written his *Arte da Gramática da Língua Mais Usada na Costa do Brasil*, the first grammar of the Tupi language. The most often mentioned episode of his life tells the circumstances in which he and Padre Manuel da Nóbrega were held hostages by the Tamoio Indians near the beach of Iperoig, on whose sands Anchieta wrote the 4072 lines of his most famous Latin poem, *De Beata Virgini Dei Matre Maria.*

[3] Ignatius de Loyola (1491-1556) was the founder of the Society of Jesus. In Paris he became the inspiration for a group of seven students, including St. Francis Xavier. In 1540, Pope Paul II gave the final approval for the formation of the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits started as missionaries, but soon dedicated themselves to education in schools and universities in Europe and overseas. Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* were published in 1548.

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