

INDIGENOUS LITERATURES AND ARTS IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

INTRODUCTION

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In recent decades, Indigenous peoples in Brazil have been at the forefront of a profound cultural and political resurgence, challenging colonial legacies and asserting new forms of visibility, authorship, and epistemic sovereignty. Literature and the arts have emerged as vital modes of this resurgence, offering not only tools for resistance but also frameworks for reimagining futurity, land, and relationality. This special issue of Portuguese Cultural Studies engages with the vibrant and expanding field of Indigenous cultural and literary production, foregrounding its power to disrupt established canons and academic methodologies. Rather than merely seeking inclusion within dominant structures, Indigenous artists and writers are reshaping the very terms through which literature, art, and knowledge are conceived. As Brazil confronts both historical injustices and urgent contemporary crises, Indigenous creativity offers a radically different vision—one grounded in ancestral wisdom, communal memory, imaginative practice, and the politics of survivance. The contributions gathered here reflect and honor this transformative movement, mapping the intersections of aesthetics, resistance, and pluriversal world-making.

Brazil's 2022 census revealed a striking demographic shift: a 90% increase in the number of people identifying as Indigenous since 2010, with the population rising from 896,917 to 1.69 million. While this surge is partly due to improved data collection by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), it cannot be separated from the long-standing efforts of Indigenous peoples to assert their visibility, recognition, and political agency. As Malleret (2023) highlights, these numbers are not merely the result of statistical adjustments but also the culmination of over four decades of grassroots mobilization aimed at reshaping public

perception and institutional frameworks. The census figures, then, should not be seen as a neutral reflection of identity. Rather, they represent a powerful expression of counter-colonial affirmation, an ongoing challenge to the state's historical efforts to erase or assimilate Indigenous existence.

This affirmation of Indigenous identity operates within what Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2023) terms *contracolonialidade*—a concept that moves beyond “decolonization” by rejecting the epistemic frameworks imposed by colonialism. For Bispo dos Santos, counter-coloniality is not a reactionary politics but a proactive cosmopolitan stance: an affirmation of Indigenous time, knowledge, and lifeways that does not seek validation from the settler state. It is a practice of divergence rather than convergence.

Viewed through this lens, the 2022 census becomes more than a demographic record: it is a reindigenization of public space. It asserts that Indigenous peoples have always been here and continue to embody distinct temporalities, sovereignties, and forms of relationality. Within the broader counter-colonial and pluriepistemic landscape, literature and the arts have emerged as vital arenas for Indigenous resurgence. Writers, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, and performers are actively reshaping Brazil's cultural imagination. Their work offers incisive critiques of colonial and neocolonial structures while proposing alternative ontologies—distinct ways of being, sensing, and relating to land, language, and community. As Lúcia Sá (2004) demonstrates, Indigenous literary and oral traditions resist being assimilated into Western aesthetic categories, instead requiring a reconfiguration of both the archive and critical methodologies. Sá foregrounds the need to approach Indigenous literatures as epistemic acts, as “forms of life” that inhabit, rather than represent, Indigenous worlds.

Building on this approach, Marília Librandi-Rocha (2014) advocates for the inclusion of Indigenous texts such as the “Carta Guarani Kaiowá” (2012) within the corpus of Brazilian literature, not as ethnographic artifacts or political documents, but as literary works possessing the textual complexity necessary for full recognition. Librandi-Rocha's concept of *palavra com terra* (“a word with land”) reframes literature as a site of epistemic resistance, where Indigenous narratives assert both symbolic and territorial sovereignty. These texts do not seek entry into the national canon on its existing terms; instead, they call for a reconstitution of the foundations of literature itself, one grounded in relationality, survivance, and ancestral sovereignty. By emphasizing the poetic and political force of the “Carta,” which appeals not only to the right to live, but to die on ancestral land, Librandi-Rocha challenges prevailing definitions of literature

in the Americas. Her work underscores one of the central claims at the core of this issue: Indigenous literature does not ask to be included within the existing terms of Brazilian literature but compels us to rethink the very terms of inclusion.

This critical perspective aligns with the arguments presented by Devair Fiorotti and Pedro Mandagará in their article, “Contemporaneidades ameríndias: diante da voz e da letra” (2018). The authors critique the systematic exclusion of Indigenous verbal arts from the Brazilian literary canon and argue for the recognition of Amerindian narratives as integral to contemporary literature. Rather than creating a separate category, they propose a critical expansion of the concept of literature, one that embraces Indigenous oral poetics and narrative forms as structurally and thematically on par with canonical Western texts. Their work also challenges the assumption of a singular literary temporality, demonstrating how Indigenous arts—whether oral or situated on the margins—fully belong to the present. Through a radical poetics of presence, these works destabilize the binaries of center and periphery, calling for a historiographical shift from linear narratives of progress to a plural, non-hegemonic understanding of literary contemporaneity.

For Potiguara writer and scholar Graça Graúna (2013), Indigenous literature functions both as a trench and a seedbed: a site of resistance against epistemic erasure and a fertile ground for cultivating plural futures. Macuxi scholar Trudruá Dorrico (2018) echoes this dual role, emphasizing that the political character of Indigenous literature does not reduce it to mere instrumentality. Rather, it exemplifies the inextricable link between poetics and politics, territory and spirituality, ancestry and futurity. Indigenous cultural production resists colonial taxonomies of genre, value, and authority, rejecting extractive epistemologies and affirming relational modes of expression that decenter the human and the national in favor of the communal, the ecological, and the cosmological. Geni Núñez (2019), a Guarani and Kaiowá scholar and activist, complements this relational perspective by foregrounding the roles of affect, healing, and community repair in Indigenous cultural practices. Núñez critiques the colonial constructions of rigid subjectivities and instead champions dissident bodies that challenge normative frameworks of gender, knowledge, and identity. Her work highlights the intersectional and deeply embodied dimensions of Indigenous resistance, particularly as enacted by Indigenous women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and two-spirit individuals. By weaving together cosmology, sexuality, and decolonial desire, Núñez offers a radical reimaging of political ontology, one in which Indigenous literature and art become vital acts of world-building.

The ethos of relationality and radical plurality runs throughout contemporary Indigenous writing and art, which often privileges the collective over the individual, land over nation, and cosmology over chronology. The current moment is marked by an unprecedented flourishing of Indigenous cultural expression across literary, artistic, and political spheres. Landmark exhibitions such as *Véxoa: Nós Sabemos* (Pinacoteca de São Paulo, 2020–2021), curated by Naine Terena, assembled over 200 works by 23 Indigenous artists from diverse nations, affirming the legitimacy of Indigenous art within the institutional circuits of contemporary Brazilian art. The 2024 Venice Biennale prominently featured Indigenous Brazilian artists in its national pavilion, signaling a transnational recognition of Indigenous presence within global contemporary art. Meanwhile, figures such as Célia Xakriabá, Ailton Krenak, Jaider Esbell, Daiara Tukano, Denilson Baniwa, and Gustavo Caboco Wapichana have garnered national and international acclaim as cultural producers and thinkers who challenge extractivist logics while asserting Indigenous futurities. In literary production, emblematic of this moment is the work of Indigenous authors, such as Omágua/Kambeba writer, geographer, and educator Márcia Wayna Kambeba, whose 2020 collection, *Saberes da floresta*, exemplifies how Indigenous literature serves as both cosmological pedagogy and decolonial intervention. The appointment of Sonia Guajajara as Brazil's first Minister of Indigenous Peoples in 2023 marked a historic political milestone, embedding Indigenous voices more deeply in the country's institutional and public discourse.

As noted above, the articles in this collection respond to and build on these current explorations and directions proposed by Indigenous writers and thinkers. We open the volume with Kevin Ennis's article, “Cosmogonic Confrontations, Multinatural Negotiations.” In this study, Ennis explores how Indigenous Amazonian writers, particularly Márcia Wayna Kambeba, use literature to center Indigenous epistemologies, cosmovisions, and ancestral knowledge as a counter to colonial and extractivist narratives. This text examines Kambeba's riverine epistemology as portrayed in her poetry that foregrounds her Omágua/Kambeba community's relationship to land and water, articulating a decolonial pedagogy and territoriality that challenges the colonial matrix of power. Through submerged perspectives and cosmogonic storytelling, her work offers an invitation to world-sharing that emphasizes Indigenous futures and resistance.

Next, Claudete Daflon's essay “Fazer morrer os olhos” foregrounds a relational and anti-extractivist poetics that interrogates the limits of applying modern Western literary paradigms to Indigenous works. It proposes that critical writing should embrace interconnectedness and be

shaped by Indigenous cosmologies, partnerships, and knowledge systems, rather than treating them as passive objects of study. Inspired by thinkers like Davi Kopenawa and Édouard Glissant, the essay advocates for a methodology that promotes cooperation and decolonial engagement, urging critics to “let their eyes die” to truly see. Her text proposes a methodologically reflexive critique that aligns literary form with Indigenous epistemologies, highlighting the importance of cross-cultural alliances as modes of resistance.

The third essay in this special issue is Diego Jesus’s contribution, “A profecia dos rios.” This study introduces the concept of *cartografia afetiva* (affective cartography) to analyze the literary and activist work of Ailton Krenak. This notion is a means to document and resist the environmental and cultural degradation of Indigenous territories, especially in the Amazon. Through poetic, performative, and collaborative practices, Krenak reframes rivers and landscapes as sacred spaces of memory, resistance, and ancestral knowledge. His work challenges colonial binaries and environmental destruction, proposing Indigenous epistemologies as pathways for reimagining relations with land, water, and history. Through the framework of riverine epistemologies, Jesus demonstrates how Indigenous literature and lived experience document and resist the ecological violence of extractivism, mapping both spiritual and political insurgencies in threatened territories.

The following essay is Rodrigo Simon de Moraes’s article on the long-overlooked novel *Um rio sem fim* by Afro-Indigenous writer Verenilde S. Pereira. Drawing on *escrevivência* and decolonial theory, Moraes explores the novel as a site of Afro-Indigenous counter-discursive resistance, illustrating how Pereira transforms personal and collective memory into a literary form that challenges dominant epistemologies and disrupts aesthetic hierarchies within the Brazilian academy and publishing industry. As such, this essay highlights the novel’s significance as a landmark in decolonial and anti-colonial Brazilian literature and can be understood as a literary testimony that challenges dominant academic and literary norms.

The final article in this volume, “The Notion of Intimacy in Amerindian Narratives,” is co-authored by José Luís Jobim and Fábio Almeida de Carvalho. It examines the concept of cultural intimacy in Amerindian narratives from among the First Nations peoples of the Circum-Roraima region (the triple border region of Amazonia between Brazil, Venezuela, and Guyana). Focusing on figures such as Rigoberta Menchú, Davi Kopenawa, and Fernando Ye’kuana, the authors argue that Indigenous testimonial texts challenge Western notions of authorship and intimacy by articulating a collective voice rooted in community memory and transgenerational

transmission. Their analysis reveals how Indigenous literary production often emerges through collaborative and intercultural processes, prompting a rethinking of narrative frameworks and emphasizing the relational, transcultural dimensions of Indigenous storytelling. They conclude that cultural intimacy is a complex notion, not homogeneous across different peoples or within a given community. These are transcultural Amerindian artifacts that blend their native origins with aspects of the dominant culture.

Together, these contributions deepen the central concern of this special issue: how Indigenous cultural production mobilizes aesthetic form to enact epistemic resistance, reclaim spatial and symbolic sovereignty, and cultivate pluriversal futures. This collection of essays emerges from and seeks to engage with the rich and expanding field of Indigenous cultural expression in Brazil. At its core lies a series of provocations: Must Indigenous literature and art always be read through a political lens? How do form, language, and genre operate within Indigenous storytelling traditions, and how do they challenge or expand Western literary paradigms? What are the risks of instrumentalizing Indigenous cultural expression, even under the guise of allyship or activism? Conversely, what generative possibilities do literature and art offer in advancing struggles for land, environmental justice, and epistemic sovereignty?

In bringing these diverse voices and perspectives into dialogue, this special issue affirms that Indigenous literature and art in Brazil are not peripheral or supplementary to national culture, but central to its reimaging. They offer powerful critiques of extractive modernities while also proposing cosmologies of care, memory, and resistance that are deeply attuned to planetary survival. At a moment when the world confronts intersecting crises of climate, democracy, and cultural erasure, Indigenous cultural production insists on the urgency of alternative ways of knowing and being. These works do not merely resist—they envision, transmit, and enact futures grounded in relationality, sovereignty, and survivance. As readers, scholars, and allies, our task is not to absorb these expressions into existing critical paradigms but to be transformed by them. By foregrounding the intellectual and aesthetic labor of Indigenous creators and scholars, we hope this issue contributes to an ongoing process of epistemic reworlding, where literature and art are not mere reflections of social struggle but active agents in the making of alternative futures. In honoring the words of Ailton Krenak, we ask with humility and urgency: How can Indigenous cultural production help us postpone the end of the world? In doing so, we take this call seriously, not as a metaphor, but as a collective, ongoing, and radically necessary praxis.

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