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Customizing Indigeneity: Paths To A Visionary Politics In Peru

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BOOK REVIEWS

***Customizing Indigeneity: Paths To A Visionary Politics In Peru.* Shane Greene. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2009. 264 pages. USD \$24.95 (paperback)
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Central to *Customizing Indigeneity* by Shane Greene is the concern, as the title suggests, for the ways through which the Aguaruna people in Peru have grown accustomed to certain foreign practices and ideas by gradually “customizing” them, that is, making them their own. Greene plays with the concentric layers of indigeneity and the ability of scholars to name and hopefully contribute to how indigeneity is lived and understood: he introduces terms like “Aguarunia” and makes distinctions between “Jivaro” and “Jivaria.” Aguaruna refers to people and groups of people who are “identifiable as Aguaruna” and Aguarunia is “used to refer both to material and metaphorical spaces;” the same logic applies to the other concepts (Greene 2009:34-35). The process of customizing indigeneity includes the efforts by Aguaruna leaders, and for instance governmental officials and anthropologists, to create and shape those terms and the meanings associated with them. Greene, for example, provides a historical account of when and how Amazonia and Amazonian indigenous groups become visible for the modern Peruvian state, highlighting the role played by a Peruvian anthropologist. Behind Greene’s concerns—made explicit by the choice of the terms like customizing and customized—are the lure of capitalism and its imposition of the abstract condition of indigeneity that the Aguaruna cannot escape.

Greene constructs his narrative through the logic of paths, or better, how his Aguaruna informants talk about paths between houses, paths to a river, to a vision-guest place or to acquire an *ajutap* vision (war vision brought by an ancestral figure) as ways to point to the most important Aguaruna goal in life, to become a notable man, a visionary warrior. The first half of the book is dedicated to explain the physical, social and political aspects of Aguaruna society through the logic of paths which also guides the author in his engagement with the main topic of the book: the realization of male power. Paths are never only a way to get from point A to point B; they are a recipe of conduct, the meanings and knowledge needed to leave point A and somehow find or produce point B. One must read the first half of the book as a path to reach the second part where different customizing paths converge and diverge: the missionization of

Aguarunia and the advent of bilingual education, the expansion of the state from the Andean highlands to Amazonia lowlands, and, finally, indigenous forms of governing through organizations.

Customizing Indigeneity speaks directly to current debate among Amazonianists about the continuity and discontinuities of indigenous forms of power and politics. Greene sees more continuities than discontinuities although, as he makes clear, paths between the past and the present are often not linear, and can be obscured by the creation of new entities: the path to “talk to paper” (literacy), which is central to the discussion in the book, lead to the appearance of new kinds of leaders—young bilingual teachers—who eventually displaced the old strong men or visionary warriors. Here in fact lies the crux of the matter in Greene’s work: are the Aguaruna activists of today the new visionary warriors of Aguaruna society?

Greene thinks so. He, of course, recognizes that the wars the Aguaruna face nowadays are different from that of the past, when they fought and kill their neighboring groups and the Inca. The Aguaruna of today struggle against the Peruvian state and global capitalism, a daunting task even for the bravest warrior. The weapons employed by Aguaruna leaders are also of a different nature: spears and blowguns have been replaced by pens and papers. Greene does not take those changes for granted. In fact the chapters on the arrival of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in Aguaruna territory and the changes of state policies toward Amazonia are rich and fascinating accounts that make a meticulous ethnographic and historical argumentation for how and why the Aguaruna embraced the changes brought by missionaries and agents of the state. As Greene explains, “[l]earning to read, write, and speak Spanish offered them a new kind of battle tactic and one that didn’t necessarily require violent confrontation or a simple retreat into the forest” (p. 124).

It is fair to ask, then, if the adoption of the pen and paper tactic amounts not to a new path toward male power that somehow mimics the old ways, as Greene argues, or if it points to deeper transformations on how power is exercised by the Aguaruna with no path that link the new to the old. Did the Aguaruna succumb to the logic of capitalism that SIL taught them? The answer seems to involve the accounts of violence and visionary quests in the post bilingual education era. In the first part of the book Greene provides a “how-to-manual for visionary warriors” which is a detail description of the uses of three hallucinogenic drugs, employed primarily but not exclusively by men, in the effort to become a *kakajam*, a visionary warrior. The use of hallucinogens does not appear in the second half where the practices of customizations are described, but Greene states that the power of bilingual education was customized when new leaders, i.e. bilingual teachers and other “career-motivated” Aguaruna, started to follow the path to become visionary warriors themselves (p. 150).

Greene however fails to disclose if or to what extent the path to become a *kakajam* nowadays involves the constant and rigorous use of hallucinogens and if at least in theory it leads to the killing of an enemy. “Customizing Indigeneity” seems necessarily to involve a negation of physical violence and the use of illegal drugs, a no-no in any law abiding state. Greene—perhaps aware that he and the book are part of the customization project of the Aguaruna—distances himself, like the Aguaruna activists, from any promotion of violence. Green includes two accounts of recent violent acts perpetrated by the Aguaruna: the massacre of peasants in Los Naranjos, and the attack to Herzog’s film camp and capture of his crew. After describing the massacre, Greene immediately writes: “I make no excuse for nor can I even fathom the kind of violence that these Aguaruna men decided to use against the Andean migrants” (p. 152). In his account of the attack against Herzog camp, Greene reveals the details of the operation as reported by the Aguaruna for an Aguarunia audience: hidden in the forest was a large group of armed Aguaruna warriors ready to attack if the visible and disarmed group could not contain Herzog’s crew. In the operation, young warriors were headed by elders who were “better schooled in the arts of the war” (p. 186). Could the attack against Herzog’s camp be a (frustrated) initiation rite? Could the old notable men still play a significant role in Aguaruna society, one that is invisible to the eyes of the state?

Greene states clearly the position of the new Aguaruna leaders: the enemy must be killed, not in a “viscerally graphic and violently mortal sense” but killed nonetheless (p. 196). The enemies are now “poverty, state formation, international research and development, anthropology and what have you” (p. 196). One wonders, however, if *viscerally graphic and violently mortal killing* remains in the path of Aguaruna male power, at least the occasional attempts and the occasional successes. Green, for instance, was the object of a failed murder attack. And, as the author suggests, the frustrated raid against him has become part of the path of the Aguaruna warriors who attempted it. Anthropologists seem to be customized by the Aguaruna for their own visionary goals. Greene himself, on the other hand, does not shy away from forging his own path in his search for a visionary anthropology. In discussing his role as an engaged anthropologist in Aguarunia, Greene remarks on his own attempts of becoming a notable man during a public discussion of his research with an Aguaruna audience: he publicly confronted an Aguaruna man who challenged him. Greene sees his action as a respectful nod to the “conversational combat” that Aguaruna men enjoy (p. 213). He is more ambiguous about taking this path further, as at least some Aguaruna expect of him, to be more than a messenger of *heroic truths* and perhaps become himself a visionary warrior, which is a definitely no-no in academia.

***New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resurgence and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia.* Bret Gustafson. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press. 2009. Narrating Native Histories Series. xx + 331 pp., maps, figures, notes references, index. USD \$84.95 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-0-8223-4546-6**

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In this work, Gustafson provides a strikingly original analysis of the struggle of the Guarani for legitimacy and power within the developing Bolivian state. The work is at one level a study of the process of school reform, detailing efforts to institute a bilingual and intercultural educational system in Guarani schools. More generally, it explores Guarani engagement with the politics of knowledge as it shapes both indigeneity and the Bolivian state.

The role of education in the politics of Latin American *state* building has attracted anthropologists since Paulo Freire, where education was considered either an instrument of imposing conformity or a tool to transform the world. Bret Gustafson, in *New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resistance and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia*, joins recent work in Andean studies that challenges any facile understanding of education as either a tool of domination or of resistance. Here, the state and ethnic minorities struggle over educational reforms that both reinforce and contradict the status quo.

This work focuses on the ethnic politics of Guarani language in a state that is predominantly indigenous-language speaking. The Guarani, however, are by any definition a minority, comprising less than one percent of the population of Bolivia. They have been ignored by the state apparatus and isolated from the Quechua and Aymara majority. Entering the educational struggles within and between the Guarani, the Bolivian indigenous community and the state, this author provides an ethnography of an extremely complex and subtle dialogue of indigeneity, knowledge and power.

The study engages two historical processes that converge at the end of the twentieth century. First, in the late 1980s, the state began an aggressive campaign of neoliberal reforms that advocated interculturalism. Market-oriented policy reforms were accompanied by an elite-led rethinking of state education. Bilingual interculturalism became central to the project of state transformation. After decades of struggling for inclusion, teacher unions and indigenous schooling projects found the opening to convert their ideas and experiments into state policy. Public school education, and specifically bilingual curricular reforms, became a critical tool in legitimizing ethnic minorities' place in the national dialogue.

The last twenty years has seen a second critical process in Bolivian indigeneity, that being the resurgence of Guarani ethnic identity and power. Centuries of state violence and economic domination had distanced the Guarani from the conceptual and social arenas of power. In a movement that Gustafson suggests finds its antecedents in violent Guarani uprisings of the nineteenth centuries, Guarani activists in the 1980s opened a dialogue about educational reform with the rapidly expanding state infrastructure. The Guarani entered into a process of indigenous resurgence as an ethnic minority in a multicultural state.

Gustafson traces this “collision and convergence” of state policy and Guarani ethnic resurgence through the national project of *educación intercultural bilingüe (EIB)*, specifically the translation of texts and teaching materials from Spanish to Guarani. Working alongside Guarani translators in the development of Guarani curricula, Gustafson is introduced to the interplay of ideas and attitudes that shape the materials. Envisioned here through Gramsci’s frame of “organic intellectuals,” Guarani translators seek to assert control over the message of the texts as the state shifts its own rhetoric from reinforcing the status quo of coloniality to espousing a new ideology of neoliberal nation-building. Gustafson’s follows the process of educational reform over a decade, as the state first fosters indigenous independence in the work, then asserts ever-greater control, eventually moving translators from the field to the capital city to work in state offices and finally contracting the work to a private, corporate entity.

More than simply a story of dyadic relationship between an ethnic minority and the nation-state, Gustafson explores the rise to power of Bolivia’s indigenous majority, which is dominated by Aymara and Quechua speakers who feel little in common with the small Guarani population. Although there is a long tradition of Quechua and Aymara education in Bolivia, the Guarani have only recently attracted the attention of neoliberal reformers. The Guarani are forced to negotiate a balance between joining with the indigenous coalition, without being overwhelmed by the project of the dominant, highland ethnic groups.

In rejecting the dichotomy between indigeneity and the state, he argues that we must also transcend the notion that the Guarani simply use educational reform to defend an ideology of exclusion. Guarani activists often sought legitimacy as an ethnic minority by articulating with the developing neo-liberal movement within the state. The Guarani educational reform agency chose to work within the system to strengthen their position within this developing inter-cultural movement.

Gustafson provides a nuanced and complex picture of the shifting positions and processes of both subaltern and dominant groups. He argues that Guarani activists’ attempts to manage this changing topography of statehood forces them to shift strategies, at times rejecting the overtures of state incorporation, and at other times reaching out to state structures to achieve a place

in the multiethnic, pluricultural state. But it would be an error to suggest that the diverse Guarani actors and agencies are unified over two decades of educational reform. Gustafson succeeds in capturing the diverse voices and movements within the Guarani ethnic resurgence. In a society where indigenous movements have often drawn considerable energy from the politicized ideologies of highland miners, the Guarani must seek their own language of engagement with state power. As the state changes its intentions and attentions, the Guarani repeatedly reposition themselves to the best advantage.

The work makes a major contribution in rethinking the means of writing historical ethnography. Gustafson considers this analysis of the historical processes of confrontation between the Guarani and both the coloniality and nation-building of the state a “multiscalar processual ethnography.” The narrative moves from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, using the Guarani violent resistance of the nineteenth century to give meaning to the work of contemporary Guarani activists in both the eyes of both the Guarani and the larger mestizo population. On one hand, he effectively documents the shifting state of Bolivian politics, as they lurch between neoliberal impulses and multi-cultural inclusiveness. On the other, Gustafson succeeds in inserting the anthropologist’s own perspective, with his conflicted role and relationships.

The result would be overwhelming if it were not for the skilled writing that Gustafson brings to the task. As his text shifts between observation, anecdote and analysis, the reader has the feeling of standing at his elbow in the field. The reader not only sees the anthropologist as the scribe for the Guarani narrative, but watches the process as it unfolds over two decades, with the author’s continual struggle to remain both accurate in his conceptualization and relevant in his efforts to aid the process. We accompany him as he repeatedly shifts his critical lens, just as the Guarani shift their methods and their message.

Two overarching messages are clear in this work: one conceptual and one methodological. First, Gustafson forces us to rethink our understanding of neoliberalism as a force of assimilation. Gustafson challenges the idea that neoliberal reforms are simply a tool for state control. In the Bolivian case, EIB plays a mediating and moderating role. In Gustafson’s words, “Bilingual and *intercultural* posit a palatable notion of citizenship through difference, while *education* offers a counterpart against specters of potential violence and the project of the neoliberal state; the state may not be interested in or capable of asserting a singular set of powers and interests” (p. 229).

Second, Gustafson makes clear that anthropologists need new forms of ethnography to explore and represent the increasingly complex forces of modern states. One cannot help but be struck by the shifting frame confronting Gustafson in this research. Neither the state nor the Guarani can be understood as monolithic entities and the identities of both are in flux. As the various sectors articulate, it

creates a constantly changing set of negotiations from multiple loci of action, experience and memory.

This work stands among the best of contemporary cultural critiques in anthropology. The work contextualizes the Guarani within the multifaceted ethnic politics of Bolivia, and the shifting winds of neo-liberal reform that swept through Latin America. It provides a careful and nuanced analysis of social conflict situated in the changing institutional relationships and the changing politics of ethnic identity.

Moreover, the ethnographer is embedded in the shifting political and ethnic relations over the years of the research process. We come to see the anthropologist's perspective, itself as a narrative that is privileged by historical processes. The subtle and nuanced writing communicates this with a sense of immediacy that one rarely finds, and which carries the reader into the historical frame of reference. This is a wonderful example of an ethnography that has taken advantage of and benefited from our critique of the objectifying lens of the ethnographic process. In doing so, however, Gustafson takes the opportunity to raise critical questions about the anthropological project in which we are engaged.

Gustafson contextualizes EIB and its actors within the historical shifts from an education of coloniality to that of state neo-liberal pluricultural inclusion. He convincingly explores the conflicting and competing demands within the agency and the vagaries that define the outcomes. This attention to the unique history of Guarani scribes, however, leaves the reader wondering about all the other individual agencies working parallel in Aymara, Quechua, and Spanish language schools, and even the other Guarani institutions. Do we achieve an understanding of the larger historical processes, do we have a better insight as to what constitutes the state and Guarani resurgence, or are we simply more aware of what it isn't?

As the Guarani continue their struggle for identity and power in the contemporary Bolivian state, the reader is called upon to question the degree to which the work is the product of the historical process that it so powerfully analyzes. As a product of that historical process, wouldn't it become a part of the historical struggle in which the Guarani are engaged? If so, does it engage that political struggle? Recognizing this "dilemma of engagement," Gustafson questions whether anthropologists can satisfy demands of others to allow access to the system of knowledge creation that we engage in.

Gustafson has "tried to go beyond the normative stance that exaggerates the power and reason of good governance or the noble suffering of 'good' social movements" (p. 278). But as Gustafson effectively avoids privileging the standard criticism of the state and makes us aware of the contested process by which the state is recreated through the struggle of the subaltern, does this force us, anthropologists, back into another, more subtle and nuanced neutrality? Has

neutrality become the new objectivity? By so carefully analyzing the modicum of power that the Guarani have in this struggle, do we do nothing to use our privileged position in the context to join forces with them in their struggle? Despite Gustafson's best efforts, I fear that the reflexive stance of the anthropologist is as a recorder of rather than an actor in the politics in which he is embedded.

This work provides new understandings of Guarani society and the Bolivian state, as well as their effect on each other. Well researched, thoughtful, and masterfully written, its importance extends beyond indigenous studies or Latin America, raising critical questions and setting a high standard for future ethnographies of the state.